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HATHERCOURT RECTORY.

VOL. III.

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HATHERCOURT RECTORY.

BY

MRS. MOLESWORTH

("ENNIS GRAHAM")

AUTHOR OF

"THE CUCKOO CLOCK," "CARROTS,"
&c., &c.

"Dans mon cœur il n'y a pas d'amour,
Mais il y en aura quelque jour."

Breton Song.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

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HATHERCOURT RECTORY.

CHAPTER I.

ALYS'S BROTHER.

“In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.”

WORDSWORTH.

DAYS passed—a week, ten days of Mr. Brandreth's fortnight were over, but still he would say nothing definite as to the possibility of moving Alys to Romary. And Alys herself seemed marvellously contented—the reason of which she made no secret of to Mary.

“You see I have never had a really close friend of near my own age—and you are only two years older—before,” she said one day. “And I never could have got to know you so well in any other circumstances—could I? You do understand me so well, Mary. It is perfectly wonderful. If I were never to see you again I could not regret my accident since it has made me know you.”

Mary was silent.

“Why don’t you answer?” said Alys, anxiously. “Am I horribly selfish to speak so, when this time you have given up to me has kept you away from your dear home and all of them, and interfered with your regular duties?”

“No, dear,” said Mary, “it isn’t that at all. My being away from home has not mattered in the least; besides, I am near enough to hear at once if they really

needed me. No, I was only thinking I could not say I did not regret your accident, because, though I am thankful you are so far better, I feel so anxious about you afterwards. Even though Mr. Brandreth does not anticipate seriously lasting injury, you may have a good deal of weariness and endurance before you. He told you ?”

“Yes,” said Alys, composedly. “I know I shall not feel strong and well, as I used, for a long time, if ever. I shall have to rest a great deal, hanging about sofas, and all that—just what I hate. But I don’t mind. I am still glad it happened. It has done me good, and it has done some one else good too. Was that all you hesitated about, Mary ?”

“Not quite.”

“Well, say the rest—*do!*”

“I was only thinking that I could not

respond as heartily as I would like to your affection, Alys, because I hardly see that my friendship *can* be much good to you in the future."

"Why?"

"Our lives are so differently placed—we are in such totally different spheres——"

"Oh! Mary," exclaimed Alys, reproachfully, "you are not going to be proud, and refuse to know us, because we are rich and you are——"

"Poor," added Mary, smiling. "No, not on that account exactly."

"Why, then? Is it because you suspect that at one time Laurence discouraged my knowing you? You can afford to forgive that, surely, *now*. And it was his duty, I suppose, to be very careful about whom I knew, having no mother or sister, you know; and at that time he did not know you."

"No, he did not; and it *was* his duty, as you say, to be very careful. He did not know us, true, but at least he knew no harm of us, except that we were out of the charmed circle. And did *that* justify him in——Oh! Alys, dear, don't make me speak about it. Let us be happy this little while we are together."

"Mary, do you dislike Laurence?"

"I do not like unfounded prejudices," replied Mary, evasively.

"That means Laurence, I suppose. But, Mary, people can outgrow their prejudices. I am not sure that you yourself are not at present partly affected by prejudice."

"No," said Mary, in a firm but somewhat low voice. "I am not indeed. I cannot defend myself from the appearance of being so, but it is not the case, truly."

Alys sighed.

"Don't make yourself unhappy about it, dear," said Mary.

"I can't help it," said Alys, dejectedly. "There is something I don't understand. I don't ask you to tell me anything you would rather not, but I am so disappointed. I wanted you to get to like Laurence. I know—I can see he likes you, and that was why I thought it had all happened so well. I did not mind the idea of being a sort of invalid for some time when I thought of your coming to see me often at Romary, and staying with us there. Mary, won't you come? I was speaking to Laurence about it last night, and he said, if I could persuade you to come, he would be most grateful to you."

"I don't want him to be grateful to me," said Mary, lightly.

"How can he help being so? What he meant was, of course, that if you came it

would be out of goodness to me. You *must* know that he would consider it a favour."

"Yes, I do. Mr. Cheviott is not the least inclined to patronise people, I will say that for him," said Mary, laughing.

"Then you *will* come to Romary?" said Alys, coaxingly.

Mary shook her head.

"I must be honest, Alys dear," she said, "and, to tell you the truth, I can't imagine myself going to Romary ag—— ever going to Romary, I mean, under any circumstances whatever."

"How you must dislike Laurence!" said Alys. "Has he displeased you since you have been here?"

"Oh dear, no," said Mary, eagerly. "He has been as kind and considerate as possible. I wish I could help hurting you,

Alys. I can say one thing, I do like Mr. Cheviott, *as your brother*, more than I could have believed it possible I could ever like him."

"Faint praise," said Alys.

"But not of the 'damning' kind. I mean what I say," persisted Mary. "And—perhaps you will think this worse than 'faint praise'—since I have seen him in this way—as your brother—I cannot help thinking that circumstances, the way he has been brought up, have a good deal to answer for in his case."

Alys's face flushed a little, yet she was not offended.

"And why not in mine?" she said. "I have had more reason to be spoilt than poor Laurence. His youth was anything but a very smooth or happy one. My father was not rich always, you know."

"Was he not? Still 'rich' is a comparative word. Mr. Cheviott has always 'moved in a certain sphere,' as newspapers say, and he cannot have had much chance of seeing outside that sphere," said Mary, with the calm philosophy of her twenty years' thorough knowledge of the world in all its phases. "As for you, Alys, you are not spoilt, just because you are not. You are a duck—at least you have a duck's back—it has run off you."

And both girls were laughing at this when Mr. Cheviott, just returned from his daily expedition to Romary, entered the room.

"You are very merry," he said, questioningly. "By-the-by, Miss Western," he went on, with some constraint, but, nevertheless, resolution in his voice, "I hope you have good news of your sister?"

"Excellent, thank you," replied Mary,

looking up bravely into his face. "She is as happy and well as possible."

There was a ring of truth in her voice, and, indeed, Mr. Cheviott would have found it hard to doubt the truth of anything that voice of hers said.

"There is no bravado in that statement," he said to himself. "I cannot understand it."

"And what were you laughing at when I came in?" he said, turning to Alys, as if to change the subject.

Alys looked at Mary.

"Mary," she said, mischievously, "shall I tell?"

"If you like," said Mary, quietly.

"Oh, Mary was just giving me her opinion of us—of you and me, Laurence—the result of her observations during the last ten days," said Alys.

Mary looked up quickly.

"Alys," was all she said; but Alys understood her. Mr. Cheviott was listening attentively.

"Well," Alys went on, "perhaps that is not putting it quite fairly. I must confess, Laurence, I forced the opinion out of her, and it took a good deal of forcing, too."

"And what was the opinion—favourable or the reverse? May I not hear that?" asked Mr. Cheviott.

"It was *pretty* favourable," Alys replied. "On the whole, taking everything into consideration, the enormous disadvantages of our up-bringing, &c., &c., Miss Western is disposed to think that, on the whole, mind you, Laurence, *only* 'on the whole,' we are neither of us quite so bad as might have been expected. But then we must remember, for fear of this verdict making us too conceited, you see, Laurence—up-

setting our ill-balanced minds, or anything of that sort—we must remember that it is not every day we can hope to meet with a judge so wide-minded, and philosophical, and unprejudiced, *absolutely* unprejudiced, as Miss Western.”

During this long tirade Mary remained perfectly silent, only towards its close her face flushed a little.

“Alys,” she said, when Alys at last left off speaking, the colour deepening in her face—“Alys, I don’t think that is quite fair.”

“Nor do I,” said Mr. Cheviott, suddenly, for he too had been sitting silent, in apparent consideration. “But, Miss Western, I know Alys’s style pretty well. I can pick out with great precision the grains of fact from amongst her bewildering flowers of rhetoric, so, on the whole, mind you, Miss Western, *only* ‘on the

whole,' I feel rather gratified than the reverse by what she calls your verdict."

"I am sorry for it," said Mary, drily.

"Why so?"

"I should think poorly of myself were I to feel any gratification at being told that, on the whole, I was not as bad as I might have been. There is no one hardly, I suppose, so bad but that it might be possible to conceive him worse."

"That was not quite Alys's wording of your opinion," said Mr. Cheviott. "Nor, I venture to say, quite the sentiment of the opinion itself. But in another sense I agree with you; there is hardly anyone—no one, in fact—of whom we might not say, if we knew all the circumstances of his or her history—of his or her existence, in fact—that it was a wonder he or she was so good—not so bad."

"That is taking the purely—I don't know what to call it—the purely human view of it all," said Mary, growing interested and losing her feeling of discomfort. "My father would say we are forgetting what should be and may be the most powerful influences of all, in whatever guise they come, on every life—the spiritual influences, I mean. And these can never be reduced to calculation and estimate, however wise men become."

"Yes, but think of the terrible forest of ill-growing weeds, the awful barrier of evil, individual and inherited, these influences have to make their way through!" exclaimed Mr. Cheviott. "Ah, yes, after all I think it the wonder of wonders that the race is not, on the whole, worse than it is!"

He rose from his chair and went across the room to the fireplace, where he stood

contemplating the two girls. Mary, in her plain grey tweed, unrelieved by any colour, except a blue knot at the throat, but fitting her tall figure to perfection. Her "brownypink" complexion, hazel eyes, and bright chestnut hair, all speaking of youth and strength and healthfulness, contrasting with Alys, who lay loosely wrapped in the invalid shawls and mantles Mary had carefully arranged about her—prettier, more really lovely, perhaps, than her brother had ever seen her, her dark hair and eyes seeming darker than their wont, from the unusual whiteness of her face. She looked too lovely, thought Mr. Cheviott, with a sigh, her fragility striking him sharply, in comparison with the firmness and yet elasticity of Mary's movements, as she leant over Alys to raise her a little. How natural, how strangely natural it all seemed! Mr. Cheviott sighed.

"Laurence," exclaimed Alys, "what in the world is the matter?"

Her brother smiled.

"Nothing—that is to say, I can't say what makes me sigh. I was thinking just then what a strange power of adaptation we human beings have. It seems to me so natural to be living here in this queer sort of way. You ill, Alys, and Miss Western nursing you. I could fancy it had always been so—in a dreamy, vague sort of way."

"I know how you mean," said Mary.

"Shall you be sorry when it is over, Laurence," said Alys, "and we are back again at Romary, without our guardian angel?"

"One is always sorry, in a sense, when anything is over, at least, I am. I suppose I have the power of settling myself in a groove to an unusual degree," said Mr. Cheviott, evasively.

"You certainly have not the power of making pretty speeches," said Alys. "*I* called Mary 'our guardian angel,' and *you* call her a 'groove.'"

Just then Mrs. Wills put her head in at the door with an inquiry for Miss Western, and Mary went out of the room.

"I wanted you to say something about Mary's perhaps coming to Romary," said Alys.

"Why? Do you think she would come?" asked Mr. Cheviott, doubtfully.

"No, I do not think she would," Alys replied, "but I wanted her to see that *you* would like her to come."

"Did she *say* that she would never come to see you at Romary?" Mr. Cheviott said.

"Yes, decidedly. Her words were, 'I cannot fancy myself, under *any* circumstances whatever, going to Romary,' and I thought I heard her half say 'again'—

‘going to Romary again.’ But she has never been there?”

Mr. Cheviott did not reply; he turned to the fire, and began poking it vigorously.

“Laurence,” said Alys, feebly.

“What, dear?”

“Please don’t poke the fire so. It seems to hurt me.”

“I am so sorry,” said her brother, penitently. “It’s the same with everything,” he added to himself. “I seem fated to make a mess of everything I have to do with.”—“I wish I were not so clumsy,” he went on aloud to his sister. “What shall I do with you at Romary? How shall we ever get on without Miss Western?”

“I shall have to make the best of Mrs. Golding, I suppose,” said Alys, in a melancholy voice. “But she fusses so! Oh, Laurence, isn’t it a pity? Just as I have found a girl who could be to me the friend

I have wished for and needed all my life, a friend whom even you, now that you know her, approve of for me, that she should have this prejudice against knowing us. Indeed, it must be more than prejudice. She is too sensible and right-minded to be influenced by that."

"Does she know that I, at one time, objected to your knowing her?" said Mr. Cheviott.

"She knows something of it—not, of course, that I ever said so to her—but she is very quick, and gathered the impression somehow. But it is not that. She said you were quite right to be careful whom I knew, and that, of course, she and her people were strangers to you. I don't think Mary would resent anything that she felt anyone had a *right* to do. No, it is not that," said Alys.

"What can it be, then? Is it her horror

of putting herself under any obligation?"

"Obligation, Laurence! As if all the obligation were not on our side!"

"Well, yes. I don't think I meant that exactly. I mean that, perhaps, she may feel that, owing her so much, we could not do less than invite her to Romary. She may have an exaggerated horror of any approach to being patronised."

"No, she is not so silly. She knows we should be *grateful* to her for coming. She is neither so silly, nor, I must say, so vulgar-minded, as you imagine. Laurence, even though you own to liking and admiring her now, it seems as if you could not throw off that inveterate prejudice of yours," said Alys, rather hotly.

Mr. Cheviott, under his breath, gave vent to a slight exclamation.

"Good Heavens, Alys," he said, aloud, "I think the prejudice is on your side.

You cannot believe that I *can* act or feel unprejudicedly."

"I do not know what to believe," said Alys, dejectedly. "I am bewildered and disappointed. There is something that has been concealed from me, that much I am sure of. And I do think you might trust me, Laurence."

It sounded to Laurence as if there were tears in her voice. He went over to her bedside, and kissed her tenderly.

"My poor little Alys," he said, "indeed I do trust you, and, indeed, I would gladly tell you anything you want to know, if I could. But there are times in one's life when one cannot do what one would like. Can't *you* trust *me*, Alys?"

Alys stroked his hand.

"Could I ever leave off trusting you, Laurence?" she said, fondly. "I do not mind so much when you tell me there is

something you can't tell—that is treating me like a sensible person, and not like a baby.”

That was all she said, but, like the owl, “she thought the more.”

And Mr. Cheviott too—his thoughts had no lack of material on which to exert themselves just then. He was sorry for Alys—very sorry—and not a little uneasy and ready to do anything in his power to please and gratify her. But how to do it?

“She cannot, under any circumstances whatever, imagine herself ever coming to Romary again,” he said to himself, over and over, as if there were a fascination in the words. “Ah, well, it is a part of the whole,” he added, bitterly, “and Alys must try to content herself with something else.”

A slight cloud seemed, for a day or two, to come over the comfort and cheerfulness of the little party at the farm. Mary was

conscious of it without being able, exactly, to explain it. "But for Alys," she felt satisfied that she would not care in the least.

"Mr. Cheviott may 'glower' at me if he likes," she said to herself. "I really don't mind. I am not likely ever to see him again, so what does it matter? He is offended, I suppose, because I did not at once accept with delight the invitation which he condescended, grudgingly enough, no doubt, to allow poor Alys to give me."

So in her own thoughts, as was her way, she made fun of the whole situation and imagined that Mr. Cheviott's decrease of cordiality and friendliness had not the slightest power to disturb her equanimity. Yet somehow in her honest conscience there lurked a faint misgiving. It was difficult to call his evident dejection haughtiness or temper, difficult to accuse

of offensive condescension the man whose every word and tone was full of the gentlest, almost deprecating deference and respect—most difficult of all to hold loyally to her old position of contempt for and repugnance to a man so unmistakably unselfish, so almost woman-like in his tender devotion to the sister dependent on his care.

“Yet he *must* be heartless,” persisted Mary, valiantly, “he *must* be narrow-minded and cruel, and he *must* be what any straightforward, honourable person would call unprincipled and intriguing, wherever the carrying out of his own designs is in question.”

“I shall be so glad to be home again, mamma,” she said to her mother one afternoon when she had left Alys for an hour or two, to go home to see how the Rectory was getting on without her.

“Yes, dear, I can well fancy it,” replied Mrs. Western, sympathisingly. “You must just remember, you know, Mary, that your present task, however distasteful, is just as much a *duty* as if that poor girl were one of the cottagers about here. Indeed, almost more so. I daresay, in spite of their wealth and position, she is far more really friendless than any of our poor neighbours. But she is a sweet girl, you say?”

“*Very*,” said Mary, warmly. “It is a pleasure to do anything for her.”

“Poor child! And with such a brother! A *most* disagreeable, cold, haughty man, I hear. But he surely cannot be anything but courteous to you, Mary? Under the circumstances, anything else would be too outrageous.”

“Oh! dear, no,” said Mary, hastily, startled a little somehow by her mother’s tone. “He is perfectly civil to me—most

considerate, and I suppose I should say 'kind.' Only I shall be glad to be at home—they are talking now of moving Miss Cheviott to Romary on Thursday—and back into my regular ways. Mother, I'm an awful old maid already, I get into a groove and like to stay there."

The words recurred to her on her way back to The Edge. Would she really be so glad to be home again? She had used Mr. Cheviott's expression, and it led her into the train of thought which had suggested it to him. Yes, there was truth in what he said. In almost every kind of life, in almost any circumstances, even if painful in themselves, there grows up secretly, as the days pass on, a curious, undefinable charm—a something it hurts us to break, though, till the necessity for so doing is upon us, we had been unconscious of its existence.

“It must be that,” said Mary. “I have got into the groove of my present life, and now that it is coming to an end, disagreeable though it has been, I feel it strangely painful to leave it. Of course it is natural I should feel pain in parting from Alys, whom I can *never* be with again; but, besides that, I am sorry to have done with the whole affair—the queer, incongruous life, the old kitchen in the evenings, and Mr. Cheviott and his books in the corner, the feeling I am of use to her, to them both, that they would have been wretchedly uncomfortable without me, and that even now that I am away for an hour they will be missing me. What queer, inconsistent complications we human beings are! It is just the coming to an end of it all, the beginning to see it in the haze of the past, that gives it a charm.”

She stood still and gazed across over the bare, long stretch of meadow land before her to the far distant horizon, radiant already in the colours of the fast setting sun. Suddenly a voice behind her made her start.

“Are you bidding the sun good night?” it said.

Mary turned round and saw Mr. Cheviott.

“Yes,” she replied. “I suppose I was. There is something rather melancholy about a sunset, is there not?” she added, after a little pause.

“There is something not rather, but very melancholy about all farewells. And sunset is good-bye for ever to a day, though not to the sun,” said Mr. Cheviott.

“‘Out of Eternity
This new day is born ;
Into Eternity
At night will return.’”

"Yes," said Mary again. "It is like what my little sister Francie once said, 'What a sad thing *pastness* is.'"

"How pretty!" said Mr. Cheviott. "Pastness! Yes, it is a sad thing, but fortunately not an ugly thing. Distance, in time as well as in space, 'lends enchantment to the view.' How strangely little things affect us sometimes," he went on. "There are occasions, little events of my life, that I cannot recall without an indescribable thrill, neither of pleasure nor pain, but a strange, acute mixture of both. And yet they are so trifling in themselves that I cannot explain why they should so affect me."

"I think I have felt what you mean," said Mary.

"And in the same way I have felt extraordinarily affected by a far-off view sometimes," pursued Mr. Cheviott. "When

I was a boy, from my nursery window we had, on clear days, a view of the ——shire hills, and on the top, or nearly on the top of one of them, we could, on *very* clear days, distinguish a little white cottage. Do you know, I could never look at it without the tears coming into my eyes, and yet, if it had been near enough to see it plainly, most likely it was the most prosaic of white cottages.”

“I have had the same feeling about things *not* ‘enchanted’ by distance,” said Mary. “Once, on a journey, driving rapidly, we suddenly passed a cottage with two girls sitting on the doorstep. A ray of rather faint evening sunlight fell across them as they sat, otherwise everything about the scene was common-place in the extreme. But yet *something* made me feel as if I were going to cry. I had to turn my head away and shut my eyes.”

"That is just what I mean," said Mr. Cheviott, and then for a minute or two they both stood silent, gazing at the sunset.

"Miss Western," said Mr. Cheviott, at last, "when you are back at the Rectory again, and the present little phase of your life is past and done with, I trust its 'pastness' may soften all the annoyance you have had to put up with. Even I, I would fain hope, may come in for a little of the benefit of the mellowing haze of distance and by-goneness?"

"I do not feel that I have had *any* annoyances to bear," said Mary, cordially. "Alys has been only too unselfish, and—and—you, yourself, Mr. Cheviott, have been most considerate of my comfort. My associations with The Edge can never be unpleasant."

"Thank you—thank you, so very much,"

said Mr. Cheviott, so earnestly that Mary forthwith began to call herself a humbug.

Would it not have been honest to have said a little more—to have told him that, while she really did thank him for his courtesy and thoughtfulness, nothing that had happened had, in the least, shaken her real opinion of his character. Of the other side of his character, so she mentally worded it in instinctive self-defence of her constancy. For, indeed, to her there had come to be two Mr. Cheviotts—Alys's brother, and, alas ! Arthur Beverley's cousin !

CHAPTER II.

ARTHUR'S COUSIN.

“I loved him not, and yet, now he is gone,

I checked him when he spoke ; yet could he speak—”

V. S. LANDOR.

THE evening that followed this little conversation was one of the—if not the—pleasantest of those Mary had spent at the farm. Alys seemed wonderfully stronger and better, or else she had caught the infection of her brother's unusually good spirits, and, till considerably past her ordinary hour of settling for the night, Mr. Cheviott and Mary stayed in her room, laughing, chatter-

ing, and joking till Mrs. Wills began to think more experienced nurses would be better fitted to take care of the young lady.

“Not that Miss Mary has not an old head on young shoulders, if ever such could be,” she remarked to her husband, “but Miss Cheviott, for all that she’s a-lying there so weakly-like, and many a month, it’s my opinion, when they get her home again, will have to lie; she do have a sperrit of her own. And the master, as I’m always a-going to call him, thinking of our Captain Beverley it must be, he has a deal of fun in him, has Mr. Cheviott, for all his quiet ways, as no one would fancy was there.”

But, by-and-by, Mary exerted her authority. Alys must go to sleep. What would Mr. Brandreth say if he found her knocked up and wearied the next day—Wednesday, too, the day before the move

to Romary, for which all her strength would be required? So, whether sleepy or not, Alys had to obey orders, and, as Mary had a long letter to Liliass to write, Mr. Cheviott volunteered to read his sister to sleep, for which Mary sincerely thanked him.

He came into the kitchen an hour or so later, while she was still busy with her letter. He had a book in his hand, and sat down quietly to read it beside the fire. After a while the kitchen clock struck ten.

"Miss Western," said Mr. Cheviott, "I think if I had any authority over you, as you have over Alys, I would exert it to make you go to bed. You were up very early, you have been on your feet, about one thing and another, nearly all day, besides a good long walk; and now you are writing I should be afraid to say *how* many sheets full. Don't you intend to

take any rest? I feel responsible, remember, for the condition in which you go back to the Rectory, and I don't want your father and mother to think Alys and I have no conscience about overworking you."

Mary left off writing, and looked up with a smile. Her wavy brown hair was somewhat disarranged, and she pushed it back off her temples with a slight gesture of weariness. Her face was a little flushed, but her eyes were bright and happy-looking. Those clear, good, honest eyes of hers, ready to tell of pleasure and content, as of, it must be confessed, disapproval or indignation! She made a pleasant picture, tumbled hair notwithstanding—she reminded Mr. Cheviott, somehow, of the day he had first seen her under the porch of the old church, when she had looked up in his face with that peculiarly attractive ex-

pression of hers of hearty, fearless goodwill.

"I do believe, now that I leave off writing and can think about it," she said, "I do believe I *am* a little tired. Not that I have done anything unusual to-day by any means. I suppose I must go to bed," looking regretfully at her not yet completed letter; "but writing to Liliás is such a temptation."

"She is enjoying herself very much, you say," observed Mr. Cheviott, in so natural and unconstrained a manner that, for the moment, Mary actually forgot that he was the speaker, forgot her ordinarily quick rising indignation whenever he ventured to name Liliás at all.

"Exceedingly," she replied, warmly. "I have never had such cheerful, almost merry letters from her before, when she has been away. I am delighted; but a

little astonished all the same," she added, in a lower voice, almost as if speaking to herself.

"I am so *very* glad of it," said Mr. Cheviott, fervently, yet with a sort of hesitation which recalled Mary to herself. Quick as thought the blood mounted to her temples—she turned sharply, the whole expression of her being, even to the pretty curves of her slight firm figure, seeming to her observer to change and harden. She gathered up the loose sheets of her letter and made a step or two towards the door. Then her habitual instincts of consideration and courtesy asserting themselves she stopped short.

"I think I had better go to bed," she said. "Good night, Mr. Cheviott."

Hitherto, latterly that is to say, in the prevalence of a tacit truce between these two, the usual amenities of intimate and

friendly social relations had half unconsciously crept in.

“For Alys’s sake,” Mary had decided, when for the first time she found herself shaking hands with the man she had prayed she might “never see again,” “for Alys’s sake it is necessary to make no fuss, and perhaps for my own, too, it is on the whole more dignified to behave in an ordinary way.”

But to-night, dignity or no dignity, her indignation was again too fully aroused to allow anything to interfere with its expression, and she was proceeding in queenly fashion to the door, when to her amazement, Mr. Cheviott stepped forward and stood in her way.

“Miss Western,” he said, quietly. “Won’t you say good night? Won’t you shake hands with me as usual?”

Mary hesitated. She did not want to

make herself ridiculous—for Liliás's sake even, she shrank from the slightest appearance of petulance or small resentment. She hesitated; then looking up bravely, said, honestly,

“I would rather not, but——” A pair of dark eyes were gazing down upon her—gazing as if they would read her very soul, so earnest, so *true* in their expression that Mary could not but own to herself that it was difficult to realise that they belonged to an unprincipled and dishonourable man.

“But?” he said, gravely.

“I was only going to say, if you think so much of shaking hands, I don't mind,” said Mary, with a curious mixture of deprecation and defiance in her tone. “I don't want to be uncourteous or exaggerated—besides, what is there in shaking hands? We do so half-a-dozen times a

day with people we do not care the least for."

"Yes," said Mr. Cheviott, gravely still, "we do. But people one doesn't care the least for are different from people one positively dislikes, or, worse still, *distrusts*."

"Can't you leave all that?" said Mary, sadly. "*I* cannot help what—what happened, and, indeed"—her voice trembling a little—"towards the Mr. Cheviott I have known *here* I should be most wrong to have any but friendly feelings."

She held out her hand. Mr. Cheviott took it in his, holding it for one little moment longer than was really necessary.

"Is it always to be war between us, Miss Western?" as if the words could not be kept back. "Heaven knows how glad *I* should be to leave for ever all the painful part of the past."

Mary slowly shook her head. Then

looking up suddenly again, she said, gently,

“We have got on very well here without fighting. Why should not the truce last till the end of the time here? There is only another day.”

“Yes,” repeated Mr. Cheviott. “Only one other day.”

Then Mary went off to bed, but not, for much longer than her wont, to sleep. Her mind seemed strangely bewildered and perplexed.

“I have lost all my milestones,” she said to herself. “I feel as if I were being forced to think black white in the strangest way. But I won’t—no, I won’t, *won’t*, WON’T!”

And with this laudable determination she went to sleep.

It was late before Mr. Cheviott left the kitchen fireside that night.

“Will the truce last,” he was saying to himself, “even through another day? Twenty times in an hour I have been on the point of saying what, indeed, *would* end it one way or another. And Arthur thought I could not sympathise with him! I wonder on which of the two of us that idiotic will has entailed the greater suffering?”

His good spirits seemed all to have deserted him by the next morning. He was grave and almost stern, and, so said Alys, “objectionably *affaire* about some stupid letters sent on from Romary.” Alys was unusually talkative and obtrusively cheerful, but Mary understood her through it all. A cloud of real sorrow was over both girls, more heavily on Mary, for she knew what Alys was still silently determined to hope against, that this was far more than the “last day” of their

queer life at the farm, that it was the end of the strange but strong friendship that, despite all obstacles, had sprung up between them.

For though Alys had almost pointedly refrained from any recurrence to the question of their meeting again at Romary, and Mary had been only too ready to second her in all avoidance of the subject, this absence of discussion had in no wise softened the girl's resolution.

"Never," she repeated to herself, "never under *any* circumstances can I imagine myself entering that house again."

And the day wore on without any allusion being made to the when or the where of their ever meeting again.

Late in the afternoon Mary had gone at Alys's request to pick some of the pretty Spring flowers to be found in profusion in the Balner woods hard by, when, as she

was returning homewards, laden with prim-roses and violets, looking up she saw Mr. Cheviott coming quickly along the path to meet her.

“Alys?” she exclaimed, quickly, with just the slightest shade of anxiety in her voice. “Does she want me?”

“Oh, no,” replied Mr. Cheviott, with a smile. “Alys is all right. What an anxious nurse you are, Miss Western!”

“Yes,” said Mary, “it is silly. I must get accustomed to the idea of her doing without me. But I could not help having a feeling to-day of a different kind of anxiety—a feeling of almost superstitious fear lest anything should go wrong with her to-day—the last day. It would be so hard to leave her less well than she is, and—of course,” she went on, looking up with a slight flush on her face, “I own to being a little proud of her! It is a great satis-

faction to hear Mr. Brandreth say that, considering all, she could not have got on better than she has done."

"Of course it is," said Mr. Cheviott, warmly. "And I am more glad than I can say that you feel it so. It is a little bit of a reward for you."

Mary did not reply, and they walked on slowly for a few moments in silence.

"How pretty your flowers are," said Mr. Cheviott, at last.

"Lovely, are they not?" replied Mary, half burying her face, as she spoke, in a great rich cluster of primroses that she had tied up together into a sort of ball. "They are the best flowers of all—these Spring ones—there can be no doubt about it."

"Or is it that they *are* the Spring ones," suggested Mr. Cheviott.

"A little perhaps," allowed Mary. "Have I not got a quantity? Alys took

a fancy for some to take home to Romary."

"Poor child, she will not be able to gather any for herself this year," said Mr. Cheviott.

"No," said Mary.

"And she will not have you to gather them for her after to-day."

"No," said Mary again, this time more drily.

Mr. Cheviott stopped short, and as they were placed in the path, Mary, without positive rudeness, could not help stopping too.

"Miss Western," said Mr. Cheviott, abruptly, "is your decision quite unshaken?"

"What decision?" said Mary, quietly.

"About coming to see us at Romary, about, in fact, continuing to honour us with your acquaintanceship—I would *like* to say

friendship, but I am afraid of vexing you—or the reverse.”

Mary pulled a poor primrose to pieces, petal by petal, before she replied.

“I wish,” she said, at last, with an appeal almost approaching to pathos in her tones, “I wish you had done as I begged you last night—let this last day end peacefully without rousing anything discordant. Mr. Cheviott,” she went on, with an attempt at a smile, “you don’t know me. There are certain directions in which I feel so intensely that it would not take much to make me actually fierce—there is something of the Tartar underlying what you think cool self-possession—and one of those directions is my sister Liliás.” Her voice faltered a little. “Now won’t you be warned,” she added, speaking more lightly, “won’t you be warned, and let our pleasant truce last to the end?”

"To the end," he repeated, with some bitterness. "A matter of a few hours, and, for the sake of keeping those peaceful, I am to relinquish my only chance of—of ever coming to a better understanding with you? No, Miss Western, I cannot let the subject drop thus."

"Then what do you want to know?" she said, facing round upon him.

"I want to know if you keep to your determination never to come to see my sister at Romary, never to enter my house again, never, in fact, to have anything more to say to Alys, who is attached to you, and whom I know you care for. You may say she might come to see you, but at present, at any rate, that is impossible—besides, in such forced intercourse there could be no real enjoyment."

"No," said Mary, "there could not be. It is best to call things by their right

names. I do care for Alys, deeply and truly, but I do not wish or intend to go on knowing her. I would not ask her to come to my home to see me, because I cannot go to her home to see her."

"And why not?"

"Because she is your sister," replied Mary, calmly. "And because I could not receive the hospitality of a man who has behaved as I believe you to have behaved."

Mr. Cheviott drew a step nearer her, and Mary, impelled, in spite of herself, to look up in his face, saw that it had grown to a deadly whiteness. She saw, too, something which she was half puzzled, half frightened at—something which in her short, peaceful experience of life, she had never come into close contact with—a strong man's overwhelming indignation at unjust accusation. She stood silent. What could she say?

"This is *fearfully* hard to bear," he said, at last. "I thought I was prepared for it, but—in spite of myself, I suppose—I had cherished hopes that recently your opinion of me had begun to soften. Miss Western, has it never occurred to you as possible that you have misjudged me?"

Mary hesitated.

"Yes," she said, at last. "I may own to you that—lately—I have tried to think if it *was* possible."

"You have *wished* to find it possible?" said Mr. Cheviott, eagerly.

"Sometimes," said Mary.

"God bless you for that," he exclaimed, "and—"

"No, do not say that," she interrupted. "I have more often wished *not* to find it so, for I—I gave you every chance—I put it all so plainly to you that horrible day at Romary—no, it is impossible that I have

done you injustice. Were I to begin to think so, I should feel that I was losing my judgment, my right estimate of things altogether. But I do not wish to continue thinking worse of you than you deserve—you may have learnt to see things differently—is it that that you were going to tell me? Heaven knows if your interference has done what can never be undone, or not; but, however this is, I do not want to refuse to hear that you have changed.”

Mr. Cheviott’s face grew sterner and darker.

“I have not changed,” he said. “What I did was for the best, and I could not but do the same again in similar circumstances.”

“Then,” said Mary, hardening at once, “I really have nothing more to say or to hear. Please let me pass.”

“No,” he replied. “Not yet. Miss

Western, I value your good opinion more than that of anyone living. I cannot let you go like this. It is my last chance. Do you not know what I feel for you—can you not see what you are making me suffer? I have never loved any woman before—am I to give up all hope on account of this terrible prejudice of yours? But for that I could have made you care for me—I know I could—could I not? Mary, tell me.”

His voice softened into a tenderness, compared with which the gentlest tones he had ever addressed to his sister were hard. But little heard Mary of tenderness or softness in his words. She stood aghast, literally aghast with astonishment—amazement rather—so intense that at first she could scarcely believe that her ears were not deceiving her. Then, as the full meaning of his words came home to her, indigna-

tion, overwhelming indignation, took the place of every other feeling, and burning words rose to her lips. For the moment "the Tartar" was, indeed, uppermost.

"You say this to me," she exclaimed. "You *dare* to say this to me. You, the man who, in deference to contemptible class-prejudice and to gratify some selfish schemes, did not hesitate to trample a woman's heart under foot, and to spoil the best chance for good that ever came to a man you profess to care for—you, selfish, heartless, unprincipled man, dare to tell me, Mary Western, that you love me! Are you going out of your senses, Mr. Cheviott? Do you forget that I am Liliás's sister?"

"No," he said, in a tone which somehow compelled her attention. "I do not forget it, and I am not ashamed to say so. I do not offer you—for it would but be thrown

at my feet with scorn—but I would have offered you a man's honest, disinterested devotion, were you able to believe in such a thing as coming from me. But *you* are blinded by prejudice—you will take into account nothing but your own preconceived interpretation. You will not allow the *possibility* of my being innocent of what you accuse me of. So be it. But there *have* been women who have known an honest man when they found such a one, and have not found their trust misplaced."

Some answering chord was touched for the instant in Mary's heart. Her tone was less hard, less cruelly contemptuous when she spoke again.

"I am not doubting your sincerity as regards myself," she said, her voice trembling a little. "I suppose you do mean what you say, however extraordinarily incomprehensible it appears to me. But

that makes things no better—oh! if you had but left me under the delusion that there was something to respect in you! I thought you narrow-minded and prejudiced to a degree, but I had grown to think you had some principle—that in what you did you were actuated by what you believed to be right. But what am I to think now? Where are all the well-considered reasons for interfering between your cousin and my sister that you would have had me believe in, now that—that—you find the case your own, or fancy it is so? What can I, too, think of your principle and disinterestedness?”

“What you choose,” said Mr. Cheviott, bitterly. “It can matter little. But you make one mistake. I never gave you *any* reasons for my interference. I told you I had acted for the best, and I madly imagined it possible that, having

come to know me, *you* might have began to believe it possible that my conduct was honest and disinterested. I had *not* intended to confess to you what I have done. My object in speaking to you again was purely—believe me or not, as you like—to try to gain for my sister the hope of sometimes seeing you. I was going on to volunteer to absent myself from Romary, if personal repugnance to me was the obstacle, if only you would sometimes come. But I am only human ; your words and your tone drove me into what I little intended—into what I must have been mad to say to *you*.”

He stopped ; he had spoken in a strangely low tone, but he had spoken very fast, and Mary's first sensation when his voice ceased was of bewilderment approaching almost to a kind of mental chaos, and of vague but galling self-reproach. But for

a moment she said nothing, and Mr. Cheviott was already turning away, when she called him back, faintly and irresolutely, but he heard her still.

“ I don’t know what to say,” she said, brokenly. “ I suppose I have said what I should not. I suppose I let my anger get the better of me. But I have never learnt to dissimulate. Your words seemed to me, remembering what I did, an insult. I suppose I *should* have thanked you for—for the honour. But it has all been a mistake. You must see I could never have cared for you—*never*; were I ten times satisfied you had done Liliās no wrong, your conduct to her remains the same. But I wish to be reasonable. Let us forget all this, and, so far as can be, let us part friends.”

She held out her hand, this time in vain.

“No,” said Mr. Cheviott. “I cannot shake hands on such terms. I run no risk of hurting your feelings by saying so ; you, I know, do not attach much consequence to so empty a ceremony, but unfortunately I do. Good-bye, Miss Western.”

He raised his hat and turned away.

When he was fairly out of sight, Mary sat down on the short grass that bordered the wood-path, leant her head against the stump of an old tree standing close by and burst into tears. Then she took her flowers, the pretty, winsome things she had plucked so carefully, gathered them all into one heap, and, rising from her seat, moved by some sudden instinct of remorse, threw them—threw them, with all the strength of her vigorous young arms, away, back among the underwood and grassy tangle where they had grown.

“Primroses and violets,” she said, as she did so, “I shall never be able to endure the sight of you again.”

CHAPTER III.

ET TU, BRUTE !

“ . . . how strange the tangle is !

What old perplexity is this ? ”

Songs of Two Worlds.

AND Alys did not get her flowers, poor girl. Nor was she told the reason why. But late that last evening, when the packing was done, and the various little personalities that, even in an enforced sojourn of the kind, are sure to collect about people, above all about people of individuality and refinement, were all collected together and put away, and the farm-house rooms had resumed their ordi-

nary consistent bareness, Mary sat down by Alys's bed and put her arms round the girl's neck and kissed her with a clinging tenderness that brought the tears to Alys's eyes.

"Dear Alys," she said, softly. "I want to thank you."

"To thank *me*," replied Alys, in astonishment. "Oh, no, Mary, all the thanks are, *must* be, on one side."

"No," said Mary. "I have many things to thank you for. You have been so patient and sweet and so grateful for the little I have been able to do for you. And one thing I may thank you for, certainly."

"What?" whispered Alys.

"For loving me," said Mary. "You have done me good, Alys. I was growing, not perhaps exactly selfish, but self-centred. I put my own home and my own people before everything else, in a

narrow-minded way, and I fancied that people who were different from us externally—people who had had fewer struggles and more luxuries than my parents—must of necessity be narrow-minded and self-absorbed and unsympathising. Alys, it is absurd, but do you know I do believe I have myself been growing into the very thing I so detested—I do believe, in a sense, I was encouraging a kind of class-prejudice.”

Alys listened attentively.

“I see what you mean,” she said.

“Mary, you are awfully honest.”

“I don’t know,” replied Mary, vaguely.

“Self-deception must be a kind of dishonesty.”

Alys hardly heard her. She was watching eagerly for the upshot of this confession, yet afraid of startling away the concession she was hoping for by any premature

congratulation on her friend's altered views. So she lay, without speaking, till at last Mary's silence roused her to new misgiving.

"Won't you go on with what you were saying?" she ventured at last.

"What was it?" said Mary.

"Oh! about your being glad you had got to know us, and——"

"Nay," exclaimed Mary, "I am sure I did not say *that*, Alys. What I said was that I thanked *you* for showing me how loving and sympathising you are, and that being prosperous and rich and courted and all that, as you are, need not necessarily make one narrow-minded and selfish."

"Well," said Alys, "it comes to much the same thing. I don't see why you need have flown up so at my way of putting it."

"Because," said Mary, with vehemence disproportionate to the occasion, "I was

speaking of and to you, Alys—you alone.”

“I am sorry to hear it,” said Alys. “I would like *my* praise far, far more, Mary, if you would give poor Laurence a little bit of it too. He deserves it, while I——”

“Never mind,” said Mary, uneasily. “Don’t let us get into a discussion, dear Alys.”

“I am sure I don’t want to discuss anything except the end of your sentence. Do finish, Mary. Now that you have got to know *me*, or like *me* a little, you are not going to keep to your horrible resolution?”

Mary’s face clouded.

“I see what you mean,” she said. “Oh! Alys, I am sorry to pain you, and very, very sorry not to be able to look forward to seeing you again, but I cannot change. I cannot——”

Alys leant forward and put her hand over Mary’s mouth.

“No,” she said, “I won’t let you repent that. I know what is coming, ‘I cannot under any circumstances whatever imagine myself, &c.’ No, Mary, you are not to say that. It is a sort of tempting Providence to be obstinate. Fancy now what might happen. Suppose I get much worse, Mary—suppose that great London doctor that Laurence is going to have down to see me, says I can’t get better—that I am going to die—wouldn’t you come to Romary then, to say good-bye, Mary?”

Mary turned away her head and sighed deeply.

“I was not going to say what you thought, Alys,” she said, at length. “I was only going to say that I cannot see any probability of my ever going to you at Romary. If you ever marry, Alys—I should not say that; you are sure to marry—*When* you do, I shall go to see you in your

own home, if you still care to have me, and if your husband has no objection."

"But yours, Mary? What about *his* objections or non-objections?" said Alys.

"They will never exist, for there will never be such a person," said Mary, calmly. "It was settled—oh, I can't tell you how long ago, always, I think—in all our family conclaves there was never a dissentient voice on the subject—that I was to be an old maid. I am thoroughly cut out for it. Anyone can see that.

'Dans mon cœur il n'y a point d'amour'
of *that* kind, certainly," she hummed, lightly.

"But, but, Mary," said Alys, "finish the verse."

"How do *you* know it?" said Mary. "It's an old Norman or Breton song. Mother sang it when she was a girl."

"I *do* know the second line, and that is all that matters," said Alys, sagely.

“Well, good night, Mary. You are not quite as naughty as you have been, but that is the best I can say for you. However, I shall live in hope. But I am awfully dull, Mary. And how merry we were last night! It is too bad of Laurence to have gone over to Romary so late to-night, just when he might have known our—at least my spirits would need cheering. You, of course, have the getting back to your beloved people to look forward to.”

And, two mornings after this, Mary woke to find herself in her own familiar room at the Rectory. What a dream the last fortnight seemed! And what a long time ago appeared now the day of Alys Cheviott's accident! Spring had come on fast since then. The leaves of the creeper round Mary's window were beginning to peep in and to be visible

as she lay in bed, the birds' busy twitter and the early sunlight told that the world was waking up once more to approaching Summer. How home-like and peaceful it seemed! yet Mary could not feel as delighted to be at home again as she had expected.

"I am anxious about Alys, I suppose," she said to herself, "and sorry to have been obliged to disappoint her. If she knew, what *would* she think or feel? would she ever wish to see me again? I hardly think so, and I could never be at ease in her presence. Another reason in favour of my decision. Yet I wish I could have avoided saying some of the things I did—even to *him*. Oh, if only I could forget all about it!"

For, notwithstanding all the strength of mind she brought to bear on the subject, that scene in the wood Mary could

not succeed in banishing from her thoughts. Over and over again it rose up before her, leaving behind it each time, it seemed to her, a sharper sting of pain, a more humiliating sense of self-reproach. Yet how and where had she been wrong? Was it not better to be honest at all costs? Over and over again she determined to banish it finally from her memory, but no sooner had she done so than some trifle—the sight of a primrose in Francie's hat, or some apparently entirely disconnected allusion, would bring it back as vividly as ever, and, with a certain fascination that Mary could not explain to herself, every word that Mr. Cheviott had said, every change of expression that had come over his face, would repeat themselves to her imagination. Was it true? she asked herself, was it true what he had said to her?—

but for her previous knowledge of his real character, but for the deep-dyed "prejudice," as he had called it, against him in her mind, could she ever have grown to care for this man? *Surely* not—yet why did this assertion of his recur to her so often, and not altogether in the sense of re-arousing her indignation?

"He is like two people in one," she said to herself, "but as to which is the real one, facts, fortunately, leave me in no doubt. And *yet* I am sorry to have wounded him so deeply, little as he cared for the feelings of others."

"You look tired, Mary dear," said her mother, when, after the early Rectory breakfast, Mary was preparing as usual to collect her sisters and little Brooke for lessons in the school-room. "Don't you think you might leave the children to

manage for themselves one other day? You need rest, I am sure, after all you have gone through."

"No, mother dear, I am really not tired," said Mary. "I only feel rather—I don't know how—dissipated, I suppose, unsettled, or whatever you like to call it."

"That only means tired, dear," repeated her mother, fondly, so fondly—for Mrs. Western was not, as a rule, demonstrative with her children—that Mary felt angry with herself for not being able to respond more gratefully to her solicitude, for, in fact, feeling rather irritated than soothed by it.

"But I have *really* had nothing to tire me, mother," she persisted. "Alys Cheviott was as considerate as possible, and, except the two first nights, I had no watching or anxiety. It was hardly to be called 'nursing.'"

“Perhaps not,” allowed Mrs. Western, “but there was the constraint and discomfort of the life—above all, the enforced intercourse with that disagreeable man, that Mr. Cheviott, whom you dislike so. I really cannot tell you, Mary dear, how much I have admired your unselfishness and moral courage during this trying time. But you will never regret it. Who knows how much good you may have done that poor girl for all her life—poor I cannot but call her, notwithstanding her riches and position, and everything—fatherless and motherless, and with such a cold, selfish brother as her only protector.”

“He is a very good brother to her, mother. I cannot but confess that I was astonished at his devotion and tenderness to her, and they are deeply attached to each other,” said Mary, her colour rising a little as she spoke. “I am afraid, mother,

I sometimes am too wholesale in my opinion of people. Once I take a dislike to them it is difficult for me to see any good in them. I want to correct this in myself."

"You are so honest, dear," said her mother.

"And as for my doing good to Alys Cheviott," continued Mary, "it seems to me rather that she might do *me* good. She is so simple, so unselfish and unspoilt."

"Any way, I am glad they were considerate, and, I suppose, grateful," said Mrs. Western. "How, indeed, could they be otherwise?"

And Mary went off to her pupils.

But lessons seemed rather heavy work this morning. The fortnight's interregnum had been far from salutary in its effects. Alexa was languid and uninterested, Josey pert and self-willed, Brooke and Francie

quarrelsome and careless. And, lessons over, there was no Lillas to whom to resort for ever ready sympathy. Mary felt strangely dull and dispirited. She missed Alys's bright yet gentle companionship, Mr. Cheviott's constant watchful attention, of which at the time she had hardly been conscious. She missed the quiet and refinement which had of late surrounded her even in the homely farm-house. Not that "home" was unrefined in the coarser sense of the word, but it seemed strangely full of small worries and irksomenesses and "fuss," and Mary hated herself for feeling less heartily ready than usual to take her share in them. She looked round her with vague dissatisfaction and misgiving. How hard a thing it was, after all, to be poor ! How difficult, increasingly difficult it appeared to bring up these younger girls as could be desired ! The boys must

make their own way in the world; but with regard to Alexa and Josey, there was no doubt that they stood at a disadvantage both as to the present and the future.

“Lilias and I had our own places in the family even at their ages,” thought Mary; “but the third and fourth daughters of a poor clergyman—what are they to do? If it were possible to give them a couple of years’ training at some first-rate school they might be fitted to be governesses. But such a thing is not to be thought of,” and, with a sigh, she turned to the letter to Lilias which was costing her unusual pains from her excessive anxiety not to let it seem less cheerful in tone than usual. “What *would* Lilias say if she knew?” she said to herself as she wrote. “I do not think I need ever tell her, or anyone, that is one comfort, and—oh, if only I could forget all about it myself!”

The next morning brought a letter from Liliás. It came, as the letters generally did, at breakfast-time, an hour at which there was but little possibility of privacy for any of the Rectory party. Mary opened, but merely glanced at it, and put it in her pocket to read when alone.

“From Liliás,” she said, calmly. “It is a long letter. I will read it afterwards. She begins by saying she is quite well, and sends her love to everybody, so no one need feel anxious about her.”

“You *might* read it now, Mary,” said Josey. “It would be something to talk about. You forget how dull it is for Alexa and me—never any change from year’s end to year’s end—while Liliás and you go about paying visits. The least you can do is to amuse us when you return, and you haven’t told us a *thing* about the Cheviotts.”

“Josephine, be quiet at once,” said Mr. Western, severely, and to everyone’s surprise. “That shrill voice of yours seems to stab my head through and through.”

“Have you a headache, father dear?” said Mary, with concern. Such an occurrence was a rare one.

“Not exactly, but my head seems oppressed and uneasy. I long for quiet,” said the Rector, nervously passing his hand across his forehead. “Lilias—did you say there was a letter from her? How is she? When does she return?”

“Return?” repeated Mary, in surprise. “Why, dear papa, she has not been away a fortnight yet! The London doctors cannot yet say how soon Mr. Greville is to go to Hastings, and they mean to stay there a month at least.”

“Ah, yes, to be sure. I am glad she is enjoying herself, poor child, but I shall

be glad to have her back again," said Mr. Western, vaguely, but with a slight confusion of manner which struck Mary as unlike his usual clear way of expressing himself. She put it all down to the "headache," however, as her mother said he had been suffering a little from something of the kind lately. And by the afternoon he seemed quite like himself again.

It was not till after morning school hours that conscientious Mary felt herself free to read the precious letter. She had looked forward to it as a treat all the morning, and had, from the thoughts of it, gathered extra patience with which to deal with her somewhat unruly pupils. They got on rather better this morning, however.

"I shall get them into shape again in a little," said Mary, to herself, as at last she

sat down on the low window-seat in her own room at leisure to read all that Lilius had to say ; “ but it certainly does not do for me to leave home even for a few days. Even if *I* could have agreed to go to Romary sometimes, that is another reason against it. And, besides, the life there would spoil me for my home duties.”

A vision, a tempting vision, came over her for a moment of how pleasant a thing “ the life there ” must be. The quiet and regularity of a well-trained and well-managed household were in themselves a delightful thing to one of Mary’s naturally methodical and orderly nature ; then the *prettiness* of the surroundings, the gardens, and the flowers, and the tastefully furnished rooms, the pictures, and the books, and the pleasant voices whose tones seemed still to ring in her ears. What pleasant talks they could

have had, they three together ; how kind and attentive to every wish or fancy of hers they would have been ; how they would have fêted and made much of her in return for her easy task of nursing Alys, had she but “given” in and agreed to forsake her colours ! Mary was by no means indifferent, in her own way, to the agreeableness of much that would have surrounded her position as a guest at Romary ; she was a perfectly healthy-natured girl, well able to enjoy when enjoyment came in her way, and a girl too of barely one-and-twenty. She gave a little sigh as she reopened her letter, hoping, in some vague, half unconscious way, therein to find consolation and support and tacit approval—ignorant though Liliás was of all details of the sturdy stand she had made.

But she was disappointed.

The letter was a nice letter, a very nice

letter, as affectionate, and sympathising, and sister-like as a letter could be. Written too in very good spirits, it was evident to see; the very result that Mary had so hoped for from Liliás's visit seemed already to be accomplished *à merveille*. Why was not Mary pleased?

"What an inconsistent, selfish creature I must be," she said to herself, when she had finished it. "Why am I not glad, delighted, to see that Liliás is happy again? If she did *not* care much for Captain Beverley, if I was mistaken in imagining her whole heart to be given to him, should I not rejoice? It does not alter *my* position, it does not in the least condone the cruel interference that might have ruined her life."

She turned again to a passage in which Liliás spoke of the Cheviotts.

"Now that you are at home again,"

wrote Miss Western, "you will have more time—at least, you will feel freer to tell me all about the Cheviotts. (For it always seems to me a mean sort of thing to sit down and write elaborate pulling to pieces of people whose hospitality one is in the act of receiving, even though in your case the receiving it was certainly enforced, and not voluntary.) I cannot help thinking Miss Cheviott an unusually lovable girl, and I shall not be at all sorry to hear that you have got rid of your terrible prejudice against the brother; I feel so sure that it is to a great extent undeserved."

Mary turned over the page impatiently.

"I wish people would not write about what they don't understand," she said to herself. "How can Liliass's 'feeling sure' affect the question one way or the other?"

Then glancing again at the letter, she

saw that there was a long postscript on a separate sheet yet unread.

“I am forgetting to tell you,” it said, “that I do believe I have come across those cousins of mother’s of whom you heard something from those Miss Morpeths when you were staying at the Grevilles. It was at the doctor’s. I had gone there with Mr. Greville, as he hated going alone, and Mrs. Greville had a cold. While we were in the waiting-room, an elderly, very nice-looking lady came in with a tall, thin, *dreadfully* delicate-looking boy of about seventeen. As Mr. Greville was first summoned to the doctor, he happened to say as he left the room, ‘I shall only be a very few minutes this morning, Miss Western.’ Immediately the lady turned to me and asked me very nicely if I happened to be any relation of the Westerns of Hathercourt, and did I

know Miss Cheviott of Romary? I was so astonished, but, of course, answered civilly. She seemed so pleased, and so did the boy, poor fellow, when I told them who I was. Mr. Greville was back before there was time for any more explanation. But she gave me her card—‘Mrs. Brabazon’—and asked where I was staying, and said she would hope to see me before we left town. The boy’s name she said was *Anselm Brooke*, and her own maiden name was Brooke, so they must be mamma’s people. Use your own discretion as to telling mother or not. It may only revive painful associations with her if nothing more comes of it.”

“It is curious,” thought Mary. “I think I may as well tell mother about it. It will give them all something else to talk of besides my adventures at the farm.”

Mrs. Western was interested, in her

quiet way, in Liliás's news. Mr. Western, somewhat to Mary's surprise, took it up much more eagerly.

"I should be very thankful, relieved I may say, if some renewal of intercourse could take place with your mother's relations," he said, when alone with Mary, the subject happening to be alluded to.

"Would you, papa?" said Mary. "I don't feel as if I cared to know them in the least. We have been very happy and content without them all our lives."

"Ah, yes! Ah, yes!" said her father. "But who knows, my dear, how long the present state of things may last? Were anything happening to me, I should leave you all strangely friendless and unprotected. The thought of it comes over me very grievously sometimes, and yet I hardly see what I could have done. Basil is so young—a few years hence I trust he may

be beginning to get on—but it will be uphill work.”

“But Liliias and I are strong and ‘capable,’ father,” said Mary, encouragingly. “*We* could work if needs were, for mother and the younger ones. Besides, you are not an old, or even an elderly man yet, papa.”

“I am not as young and by no means as strong as I have been,” said Mr. Western, with a sigh. “I don’t like this feeling in my head. I have never had anything like it before, and it makes me fidgety, though I have not said anything to make your mother uneasy. Perhaps it will be better now that I have spoken of it; it may be more nervousness than anything else.”

“I trust so, dear father,” said Mary, anxiously. “Are you not glad to have me back again? Didn’t you miss me

dreadfully?" she added, trying to speak more lightly.

"Very much indeed, my dear. I dare say it affected my spirits more than I realized at the time. Yet I could wish, as I was saying, that all of you, you and Lilia especially, had more friends, more outside interests. I hope we have not been selfish and short-sighted in the way we have brought you up—keeping you too much to ourselves, as it were," again Mr. Western sighed. "It is possible, I suppose, to be *too* devoid of social ambition. By the way," he went on, "I think that Mr. Cheviott must be a very fine fellow. People took up an unreasonable prejudice against him in the country at first from his manner, which, I believe, is cold and stiff. But they are finding themselves mistaken. He must be exceeding clever, and, what is better, thoroughly right-minded. I have

been very much pleased by some things I have heard of him lately; he has shown himself so liberal and yet sensible in his dealings with his tenantry."

"Indeed," said Mary. She was pleased to see her father roused to his usual healthy interest in such matters, yet wished devoutly the model proprietor in question had not been the master of Romary.

"That place had been grossly mismanaged in the old days," continued Mr. Western. "But it will be a very different story now. How I wish we had a squire of that kind here, there would be some hope then of doing practical and lasting good."

"Still no squire is better than a bad one," said Mary.

"True, very true. How did you like Mr. Cheviott, Mary? I was just thinking

I should be rather pleased to make friends with him. He might be a good friend to the boys some day, and no one could say we had *courted* the acquaintance in the way your mother and I have always so deprecated."

"No," said Mary, feebly.

"Coming in such an altogether unexpected way, you see," pursued Mr. Western, who seemed "by the rule of contrary," thought Mary, to be working himself up to increasing interest on the subject she was so anxious to avoid, "I should not have, by any means, the objection I have always had to such an acquaintance. They are sure to call—in fact, they cannot possibly avoid doing so."

"I don't know," Mary moved herself to say, "I *hardly* think they will."

"It will be exceedingly, strangely uncourteous if they do not," said her father,

with unusual warmth. "Surely, my dear, you were not so ill-advised as to say anything to discourage their doing so," he added, in a tone of most unwonted irritability.

"I am afraid what I said may have *indirectly* tended to do so," said poor Mary, feeling as if she were ready on the spot to run all the way to Romary and back to beg Mr. Cheviott to call on her father at once.

"You were very foolish, very foolish indeed," said Mr. Western, severely. "It is pride, and very false pride, that is at the root of such things, and I warn you that much future suffering is in store for you if you encourage such a spirit."

"I can't imagine any future suffering much worse than the present one of having displeased you," said Mary, struggling hard to keep back the tears that would come.

"But indeed, father, I thought I was doing what you and mamma would like."

"Your mother has been mistaken before now in such matters," said Mr. Western. "However, there is no more to be said about it. I confess I should have enjoyed seeing more of a man of Mr. Cheviott's character and talents, and it is mortifying at my age to be placed in the position of being unable to receive a friendly call from a neighbour."

"But I did not put it in that way, papa, indeed I did not," said Mary. "Oh, papa, cannot you trust me? If there is anything I have thoroughly at heart it is that you should receive all the respect and consideration you so entirely deserve."

"Ah, well, ah, well, my dear, say no more about it. You have made a mistake, that is all. Do not distress yourself any more about it," said Mr. Western, with

some return to his ordinary equanimity. But he pressed his hand wearily against his head as he spoke with the action that was becoming habitual to him, and Mary's heart felt very heavy. On all sides nothing but reproach. Where or how had she done wrong? *Was* it all personal pride and offended feeling that had actuated her conduct, under the guise of unselfish devotion? No, take herself to task sharply as she would, her conscience would not say so.

“Though there must have been a mingling of personal feeling and wounded pride, far more than I was conscious of,” she said, regretfully. “And now it is too late. I have myself placed a far more hopeless barrier between us by the scornful way I rejected what—what he said to me, what, indeed, I do not believe he ever would have said had I not in a

way goaded him to it. Oh, yes, I must have been wrong—if only I could clearly see how !”

She was too young to have had much experience of that terrible longing, that anguish of yearning “to see how” we have been wrong; too young to understand that, were that cry answered at our entreaty, half our hard battle would be over; too young to have any but the vaguest conception of the bewildering complication of motive in ourselves, as in others, which at times makes “right and wrong” seem but meaningless jargon in our ears, idle words to be presumptuously discarded with other worn-out childishness. As if our childhood were ever over in this world!—as if the existence of eternal truth depended on our understanding of it !

Mr. Western’s head-ache increased to

severity that afternoon, and Mary took all the blame of it on to herself, notwithstanding her mother's consolations and assurances that it would pass off again as it had done before.

CHAPTER IV.

A TURN OF THE WHEEL.

“This changing, and great variance
 Of earthly states, up and down,
 Is *not but* casualty and chance
 (As some men sayis without *ressoun*).”

ROBERT HENKYSOUN.

IT did “pass off” again. The next day Mr. Western seemed nearly as well as usual, though, to Mary’s eyes, there was a tired and unrestful expression on his face with which she could not feel familiar.

“He is *not* looking well. He does not seem like his old self, I am certain,” she said in her own mind over and over again.

But what could be done? He declared there was nothing really wrong; the very mention of sending for Mr. Brandreth irritated him unaccountably, and he was most urgent with Mary to say nothing to arouse her mother's anxiety. So the utmost Mary could do was to please him in all the small ways ready affection can always suggest, to exert herself to be even more cheerful and entertaining than her wont.

She wrote to Lillas, begging her to let most of her letters be to her father, and urging upon her the desirability of meeting with all possible cordiality Mrs. Brabazon's friendly overtures. But for some days Lillas had nothing more to tell of the new-found cousins.

A week passed, a week of pretty hard work for Mary. What with "the children's" extra calls upon her patience and attention, her anxiety about her father, and un-

usual efforts to seem cheerful and light-hearted, its close found her really tired and dispirited.

“Far more tired than with nursing Alys,” she said to herself, when on Saturday afternoon she was taking Brooke and Francie a walk, thankful to know that the more troublesome members of her charge were safely disposed of for the rest of the day in a holiday expedition to old Mr. Halkin’s farm. “That was play compared with the worry and fret of the last few days. And why should I feel it so? There is something not right about me just now. *I* am changed, though I blame the children. I have grown captious and discontented. I do believe that fortnight at the farm spoilt me—the being thanked and praised for everything I did. What a silly goose I am, after all! How I do wish I could hear how Alys is—I do think she might

write again, but I suppose it is my own doing," with a little sigh.

For two or three pencilled words from Miss Cheviott, saying merely that they had got safe to Romary, that she had borne the drive pretty well, but was wofully dull without Mary, were all the news Mary had had of her late patient.

Her thoughts were interrupted by little Francie. She had been running on in front with her brother, but turning suddenly, fled back to Mary in alarm.

"What's the matter, dear?" her sister exclaimed, for the child was white and trembling.

"A horse," whispered Francie, "another naughty horse coming so fast, Mary, and it makes me think of that dedful day."

Francie's fears had exaggerated facts. The horse, coming up behind them on the

soft turf at the side of the path, which deadened the sound of its approach, was proceeding at an ordinary pace, which slackened somewhat when its rider caught sight of the little party in front of him. Slackened, but that was all. Mr. Cheviott, for it was he, passed them at a gentle trot, just lifting his hat to Mary as he did so. Mary's face flushed as she bowed in return.

"I do think," she said to herself, "as we are *not* to be friends, it would be much better taste for him not to come our way at all. It will annoy poor father exceedingly, in his nervous state, to hear of Mr. Cheviott almost, as it were, passing our door. But, of course, he may have business at the farm."

And she called to Brooke and Francie, volunteering to tell them a story, and tried her best bravely to force her mind away

from the sore subject. But a surprise was in store for her.

More than an hour later, when she and the children were close to the Rectory gate on their return home, little Brooke, who was of an observant turn of mind, called her attention to some fresh hoof marks on the gravel drive.

"See, Mary," he said, "some one's been here since we came out. I wonder if it was that horse we met, that the gentleman belonged to that bowed to you?"

"That belonged to the gentleman, you mean," said Mary, laughing in spite of herself. "Oh! no, I am sure it has not been he, Brooke dear."

But Mary was wrong. Her mother met her at the door, her face bright and interested, her hands filled with some lovely flowers.

"Mr. Cheviott has been here," she said,

eagerly, "and it has done your father so much good. He stayed fully half an hour with him, and talked so pleasantly, your father says, and he brought these flowers for you from his sister with a note. What a pity you were out!"

"I daresay it was quite as well," said Mary, calmly. "Papa has had him all to himself, and he enjoys a quiet talk with one person alone just now. I am really very glad Mr. Cheviott called, as it has pleased papa."

And in her heart she could not deny that this was behaving with "something like" generosity!

Alys's note was but a few words—she was not yet allowed to write more, she said—but few as they were, the words were full of affection and gratitude. The London doctor had not yet been, but was expected next week. In the meantime she

had to lie perfectly still, and it *was* rather dull, though “poor Laurence” did his best. And she ended by hoping that Mary would think of her while arranging the flowers. Mary certainly did so—and with feelings of increased affection, not unmingled however with the pain of the old vague self-reproach.

For some days Mr. Western seemed quite to have recovered his usual strength and spirits, and Mary was glad to be able to write cheerfully to Liliás, who had been threatening a premature return home, had the news thence not improved.

“Papa is better,” she announced to Mrs. Greville, two days after their arrival at Hastings, when the afternoon post brought Mary’s letter.

“It seems to me,” she went on, after receiving Mrs. Greville’s congratulations on the good accounts,—“it seems to me that

it is far more his spirits than anything else that are affected."

"But at his age that is not a good sign," said Mrs. Greville.

"I suppose not," said Lillas, thoughtfully. "Mary says he has begun to think and speak so anxiously about our future in case of anything happening to him."

"Ah yes," said Mr. Greville, complacently, "that's the worst of a large family."

"The worst and the best too," said Lillas. "If papa's health did break down he would have us all to work for him."

Mr. Greville smiled—a not unkindly but somewhat dubious smile.

"Easier said than done, my dear girl," he said. He rather liked to provoke Lillas into a battle of words, she grew so eager and looked so pretty when she got excited; he would not have objected to a daughter, or even a couple of daughters like her, though

the bare thought of all the younger Westerns in the overflowing Rectory made him shiver.

But before Liliás had time to take up her weapons there occurred a sudden diversion. A ring at the front door bell, which, while talking they had not noticed, was followed by the announcement, by Mrs. Greville's maid, that a lady was asking for Miss Western.

"A lady for Miss Western," repeated Mrs. Greville. "Show her in then, Miller, at once."

But the lady, it appeared, declined to be "shown in." She had begged that Miss Western would speak to her for a moment in the hall, not feeling sure that there might not be some mistake.

"What a queer message," said Mrs. Greville. "Take care, Liliás; it is probably some begging person."

“No,” said Liliás, with a sudden inspiration, as she turned to leave the room, “I don’t think it is. I do believe it is Mrs. Brabazon.”

Her intuition was correct. Mrs. Brabazon it proved to be. Mrs. Brabazon on foot, with none of the *apanage* of the Brooke wealth about her except her richly comfortable attire and general air of prosperity and well-being. Only her kindly eyes had a somewhat careworn expression, and there were lines in her face which told of past and present anxiety. She received Liliás with cordiality almost approaching affection.

“I am so glad it is you,” she said, as she shook hands with Liliás. “I was so afraid it might be some other Miss Western, though the name is uncommon, not like *Weston*. Do you know what I did? Fancy anything so stupid! I lost your address,

which you remember I noted down on a bit of paper in Dr. ——'s waiting-room. I could not remember the name of the friends you were staying with, and of course hunting for you in all the hotels in London would have been like looking for a needle in a haystack. And I have so little time, I am always so hurried to get back to Anselm when I am out. It was not till the day before we left town that it occurred to me to try to trace you through Dr. ——, and when I went to his house for the purpose he was off to the country ! Oh ! you don't know how vexed I was."

"And how did you find me out here?" asked Lilius, a little bewildered by Mrs. Brabazon's unconcealed eagerness to prosecute the acquaintance so unexpectedly begun.

"By the local paper—the visitor's guide, or whatever they call it. Of course I was

not looking for *you*, I had no reason to suppose you were here ; but the moment I saw the name Western I felt sure it must be you, and Anselm felt sure that Greville was the name of your friends. It really seems quite—what people call providential, though, somehow, I never like using the expression in that way.”

“And how is your nephew—young Mr. Brooke ?” said Lillas.

Mrs. Brabazon shook her head.

“It is Basil over again—ah, it is heart-breaking work,” she said, sadly. “But I forget, I am speaking to you as if you knew all about us.”

“Somehow I feel as if I did,” said Lillas, “the familiar names—one of my brothers is Basil, and another Anselm Brooke, but we call him Brooke always.”

“And which is Basil ?”

“The eldest,” said Lillas. “He has got

a berth, as he calls it, in an office in the City. It is a good opening, I believe, and he will probably be sent out to India in a year or two. But in the meantime, of course, he gets very little, and—and it keeps us very strait at home,” she added, with a little smile.

Mrs. Brabazon listened with unfeigned interest.

“I must hear all about them,” she said. “But not to-day. And I am keeping you out here in the passage all this time.”

“That is my fault,” said Lilius. “Won’t you come in? I *know* Mrs. Greville would be pleased to see you.” (A thoroughly true assertion, as Mrs. Greville was already on the verge of that peculiar phase of *ennui* so apt to seize on active practical people when away from “home” and its duties, stranded in a strange place where they know no one, and never go out without

the consciousness of the terrible word "visitors" branded on their foreheads.)

"Not to-day, thank you, my dear. I *must* run home," said Mrs. Brabazon. "But tell me what day will you spend with us? Can you come to-morrow? We are at the——"

Lilias might have hesitated to accept *too* readily the invitation, however cordial, of the rich relations who for so many long years had ignored Margaret Western and her children; but the influence of Mary's earnest advice was too strong upon her to make her dream of holding back. Besides, it was impossible to look in Mrs. Brabazon's face and doubt her good intentions.

"Thank you," the girl replied. "I should like to come very much. But I think I must return here early, the evenings are so dull for Mr. and Mrs. Greville."

"Of course," said Mrs. Brabazon.

“And Anselm is always so tired in the evening. The day-time is the best for us. I will send the carriage for you at half-past twelve—will that do?—and it shall bring you back again at four or five, or any time you like. Possibly Anselm may be going a drive, and would come round this way for you. And pray apologise to Mrs. Greville for my unceremonious behaviour.”

“Thank you,” said Lillas. “Yes, that will suit me perfectly. I shall be ready at half-past twelve.”

“Good-bye, then, for the present. I shall have a great deal to talk to you about to-morrow. I want to hear *everything* about your brothers and sisters and everybody,” said Mrs. Brabazon, as she shook hands in farewell.

Lillas went back to the drawing-room to tell her surprising news to her friends.

Mrs. Greville was full of interest and excitement, Mr. Greville somewhat inclined to question the advisability of this sudden friendship.

“Have you ever heard your mother speak of this Mrs. Brabazon? Are you quite sure she is what she represents herself to be?” he said, doubtfully.

Lilias smiled.

“Oh, yes,” she replied. “I am quite sure of that. Mamma remembered Mrs. Brabazon by name. She was a Miss Brooke, and her father and my grandfather were first cousins. These Brookes are the elder branch.”

“But who are they?—I mean, how many are there of them?” asked Mrs. Greville. “Why is Mrs. Brabazon always with them?”

“The mother is dead, I am sure of that,” said Lilias, “and I *think* Mrs. Bra-

brazon has kept house for Mr. Brooke since her death. It was Mary that told us all we knew, and she heard it from some ladies she met at your house."

"Of course!" exclaimed Mrs. Greville, in a tone of relief, "the Morpeths—you remember, Charles? Oh, yes, of course it is all right. Frances Morpeth was always saying how nice Mrs. Brabazon was. I am sure you are quite right to cultivate the acquaintance, Lillas. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Greville?"

"I suppose so," said Mr. Greville, lazily. "But I hope the cultivation of it will not absorb you altogether, Lillas. It would be wretchedly dull in these stupid lodgings without you, my dear, to argue with and contradict, and look at."

"You need not be afraid. I am not going to desert you," said Lillas, laughing, as she left the room.

“That girl really grows prettier and prettier,” said Mr. Greville. “She is much more amusing, too, than her sister Mary. I fancy Mary is something of a prig; there was no getting a smile out of her the last time she was over with us. Lilius is brighter than ever I knew her, full of fun and pleased with everything.”

“She is very nice,” agreed Mrs. Greville. “But they are both very nice. I am not at all sure but that it is Mary who has the lion’s share of the work at home. How pleased I shall be if anything comes of these new relations.”

“Umph,” said Mr. Greville.

“Mr. Brooke’s carriage” came for Miss Western at half-past twelve. Whether “Mr. Brooke” referred to the young man she had already seen, or to a father whom she had as yet heard nothing of, Lilius felt in some doubt. But before the day

was over Mrs. Brabazon's extreme communicativeness had put her in full possession of the family history past and present, and had, besides, suggested hints which made the poor girl giddy with surprise and bewilderment, and an utterly novel sense of perplexity.

"I must consult some one," she said to herself, when she got back to Mrs. Greville's lodgings. "I feel too confused and amazed to decide what to do. I had better tell the Grevilles, they are sensible and kind and really interested in us, and they will advise me as to whether I should write home about what I have heard."

So to Mrs. Greville's inquiries as to how she had got on, what she had heard, etc., etc., Lillas was very ready to give most comprehensive answers.

"I got on very well indeed, thank you," she said. "They were as cordial and kind

as possible. Mr. Brooke, Anselm's father, is to be down here on Friday, and Mrs. Brabazon wants me to spend Saturday with them to see him, and what's more, she made me write from the hotel to Basil, to ask him to come to them from Saturday to Monday if he can get off, which I am sure he can. She told me to tell him she would 'frank' him both ways. Wasn't that considerate, Mrs. Greville?"

"*Very*," replied Mrs. Greville, heartily. "I am exceedingly glad to hear it."

"I am sure Basil will come," continued Lillas, "for I told him papa and mamma would wish it. But, oh! Mrs. Greville, you will really think I am dreaming when I tell you what else Mrs. Brabazon told me."

She looked up in Mrs. Greville's face, her blue eyes bright with excitement, her cheeks glowing with eagerness. Even

lazy Mr. Greville's curiosity was aroused.

"Why, let us guess," he said, jokingly. "Is old Mr. Brooke going to adopt you and make you his heiress? Why, you *would* be irresistible then, Lillas! But, by-the-by, he has a son and heir, so it can't be that."

"No," said Lillas, "not exactly. But it's something quite as wonderful. What *do* you think, Mrs. Greville—Mrs. Brabazon gave me to understand—in fact, she said so plainly—that after Anselm, Mr. Brooke's only remaining child, *mamma* is heir to all, or, at least, to a great part of their property."

"Your mother!" exclaimed Mrs. Greville, apparently too astonished to say more. Mrs. Western, she knew, had been a governess when her husband fell in love with and married her, and though she had always known her to be what is vaguely

termed "well-connected," she had somehow never associated her with possible riches or "position;" she had, on the contrary, often annoyed the Western girls by a slight shade of patronage in her tone of speaking of their mother, whom she looked upon as an amiable, decidedly unsophisticated and unworldly woman—"sair hauden doun" by the small means and large family at the Rectory.

"Your mother!" she repeated.

But Mr. Greville's worldly wisdom prevented his losing his head at the news.

"*After* Mr. Brooke's son, you say," he observed. "But that makes all the difference. Lots of people are next heir *but one* to a fortune without ever coming any nearer it. What's to prevent this Mr. Anselm marrying and having half-a-dozen sons and daughters of his own?"

"That is the thing," said Liliás, "that—

Anselm, I mean, is, of course, what the whole depends upon. Had he been strong and well we should probably never have heard or known of our—of mamma's position. But—it seems so horrid to talk about it so coolly—Anselm will never grow up and marry, Mr. Greville—he is only sixteen now—for he is dying.”

“Dear me, dear me,” said Mr. Greville, “how very, very sad!”

But underneath his not altogether conventional expression of sympathy, Lilius could plainly detect the reflection—“That very decidedly alters the state of the case.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “it is terribly sad.”

“And, under these circumstances—for you speak of this son as an only child, and he has probably long been delicate,” pursued Mr. Greville—“how is it, may I ask, that these Brookes have never before looked up your mother? Their meeting

with you now is purely accidental, and more Mrs. Brabazon's doing than Mr. Brooke's, it seems to me."

"She explained all that," said Lilius. "It is only very lately that Anselm has been an only child. There was quite a large family of them, and five, I think, lived to grow up. But one by one they have dropped off—all died of consumption like their mother. Basil, the second son, and apparently the strongest, lived to be six and twenty, and only died last year, having caught cold at some races—regimental races, I mean; he was in the ——— Dragoons," her colour rising unaccountably as she mentioned the regiment. "Before his death, Mrs. Brabazon says, he was very anxious to look us up, for he never expected that Anselm would live long. But his father has been in such a broken-down state that Mrs. Brabazon could never get

him to take any interest in the matter. *She* does ; it is wonderful how she can do so, I think, when one remembers how she has seen her own nephews and nieces die one by one."

"There is no chance, I suppose, of old Mr. Brooke's marrying again," said Mr. Greville, consideringly.

"None whatever. He is nearly seventy, fifteen years older than his sister, and thoroughly aged by trouble, she says."

"Then the estates are entailed?"

"Principally, not altogether. But they have never been separated, and that was why Basil Brooke wanted his father to look us up. He was anxious that the alienable—is that the word?—part of the property should go with the entailed if the next heir were a desirable sort of person. For I must explain *Basil* is the real heir ;

mamma would only have a certain life-rent, a very ample one though, she could provide for all her other children out of it. The entail is somehow rather peculiar. Mrs. Brabazon comes in for nothing, though so much nearer than mamma, because she has no son."

"And has your mother no idea of all this?" inquired Mr. Greville.

"None whatever," said Lillas, decidedly. "She knew there had been an unprecedented number of deaths among the Brookes, but she has always had a vague idea there were scores of them left still. Then she never associated herself, being a woman, with the possibility of succession. There *were* several female Brookes only a few years ago, but of the three now left not one has a son, and they are all old, Mrs. Brabazon the youngest. Now, dear Mr. Greville, the question is this—what, or

how much should I write home of all that I have heard?"

"Why not all?" said Mrs. Greville.

"I don't know," said Lillas. "I suppose it is from a vague fear of rousing hopes that may possibly be—no, not disappointed, there hardly seems any chance of that—but deferred, *long* deferred possibly. Anselm may live some months, but there can be no question of his recovery. He spoke to me about it himself, he is nearly as anxious for his father to recognise us and settle things as his brother Basil was, Mrs. Brabazon says. But Mr. Brooke may live a good many years, may quite possibly outlive papa," the girl added, with a sad little drop in her voice.

"It is of that I am thinking," said Mr. Greville, turning to Lillas with a kind earnestness of manner contrasting strongly with his usual easy indifference. "By

‘that’ I mean your father’s state of health and spirits. It seems to me it would be cruel to keep all this from him for fear of possible delay in its coming to pass. The relief to him of knowing you all would have something to look to in case of his death would be great enough to be almost like a new lease of life. And surely, if things were turning out as Mrs. Brabazon says—surely, if any such need were to arise, Mr. Brooke would do something for your mother at once.”

“I *think* so,” said Liliás. “Mrs. Brabazon did not say so exactly, but she certainly inferred it. When speaking of Basil, and hearing of his being in an office in the City, she and Anselm looked at each other. ‘That is just what we heard,’ Mrs. Brabazon said, and Anselm asked if he did not dislike the life very much. I said, ‘No, not so very much—he

was glad to be doing anything, though his great wish *had* been to go into the Army,' and poor Anselm said he did not see why that might not still be arranged."

"Curious unselfishness, surely, to take such an interest in the one who, he believes, will eventually take his place," observed Mr. Greville.

"Yes," said Lillas, "it struck me as strangely unselfish. But Mrs. Brabazon says Anselm has never cared to live since his brother's death. Basil was the strong one, and Anselm leant on him for everything, he has always been so delicate, 'living with a doom over him ever since he was born,' Mrs. Brabazon called it."

"Consumption, I suppose?" said Mr. Greville. "But your mother does not look as if she came from a consumptive family."

"No, it is not from the Brookes, but from

their mother's side that they are consumptive," said Liliás. "The deaths among the other Brookes have been in many cases from accidental causes."

There fell a little pause; Liliás, eager for decision, was just about to break it with a repeated request for advice, when Mr. Greville intercepted her intention.

"I'll tell you what I'd do in your place, my dear," he said, suddenly. "Write the whole to your sister Mary. She's as sensible a girl as one often meets with, and, being on the spot, can judge as to the effect the news is likely to have on your father."

"Yes," said Liliás, "I think I shall. She is on the spot, as you say, and could tell it less startlingly than I could write it. Besides," she added, with a slight touch of filial jealousy, "she can consult *mamma*."

“ Oh, yes, of course,” said Mrs. Greville, in a conventionally proper tone.

“ And, after all,” said Mr. Greville, a little maliciously, “ ‘ Mamma ’ is really the chief person concerned.”

He was shrewd enough to suspect that, notwithstanding his wife’s honest pleasure in good fortune coming to her old friends, she would have preferred its not coming to them through their mother, the quiet, reserved woman whom she had somehow never been able quite to understand, who met her good-natured patronage with an unruffled dignity which always prevented hearty Mrs. Greville from feeling quite at ease in her presence, though mentally considering her as rather a poor creature than otherwise.

It was late that night, or early, rather, the next morning, before Lilius went to

bed. For, till her letter to Mary was written, she felt she could not rest. If only she could have written one other letter too !

“Oh, Arthur,” she said to herself, “what good fortune your love seems to have brought us already ! And should you become poor for my sake, what happiness if it should ever be in my power to restore to you any of what you may have sacrificed ! My sisters and I would have daughters’ portions, Mrs. Brabazon said. And mine could not, at the worst, but be enough for us to live on. How strange that the Brookes should know him !”

For in the course of conversation that day, it had been mentioned, *à propos* of the Cheviotts’ meeting with Mrs. Brabazon in Paris, that Arthur Beverley and Basil Brooke had been brother officers and great friends.

CHAPTER V.

SIR INGRAM DE ROMARY.

“ Raged the loud storm
 The lightning o’er his path
 Flashed horribly—the thunder pealed—the winds
 Mournfully blew ; yet still his desperate course
 He held ; and fierce he urged his gallant steed
 For many a mile. The torrent lifted high its voice.”
 Lydford Bridge.

HATHERCOURT letters *sometimes* came of an evening. When any thoughtful or good-natured neighbour happened to pass the Withenden post-office at or after three o’clock in the afternoon, it was a favourite attention to call for the Rectory letters. And sometimes it happened that

the owners of the letters were not sorry to receive them in private, for even among the least reserved or secretive natures it is not always pleasant to have one's affairs discussed or guessed at by half-a-dozen inquisitive young people round a breakfast-table.

Lilias had not written quite as much to Mary as usual of late, finding it difficult to make time for more than the almost daily lengthy and amusing letters she sent to her father. So when Mr. Wills from The Edge, who, since her residence under his roof, had taken "Miss Mary" into special favour, called with a thick budget addressed in Lilias's hand, Mary felt surprised as well as delighted.

But her pleasure was somewhat tinged with alarm when she read the few words which, at the top of the sheet, first met her glance.

“Read this when you are alone, and likely to be uninterrupted. It is nothing wrong. Don’t be frightened.”

But frightened of course she was, and thankful to be able at once to satisfy herself.

“Nothing wrong!” It would have been difficult to judge from Mary’s face, when she looked up after finishing the letter, what had been the nature of its contents. Like Liliás, her first impression was one of such utter bewilderment that it seemed as if her brain were refusing to take in the facts before her. She got up from her seat, pushed her hair back from her forehead, and tried to think reasonably and rationally. But it was difficult.

“Can I be dreaming?” she said to herself. “Mamma heir to all the Brookes’ property! *Can* it be true? Oh, papa, poor papa—he must be told. Only last

night again he was talking to me of his racking anxiety about our future; it is so impressed on him that he is not going to live long. And, as Liliás says, this news may be fresh life to him."

She sat down again, and for some minutes allowed her fancy to run riot in the new world so suddenly opened before her. To be rich! How extraordinary the idea seemed to her—no more furrows on her father's face of anxiety as to the future, no more daily worries for her mother about butchers' and grocers' books and servants' wages and everlasting new boots for the boys; plenty of books and music, and pretty dresses even, which in her heart Mary was by no means given to despise, for herself and Liliás; a first-rate governess for the girls—unlimited power as well as will to help their poorer neighbours—a pretty and luxurious home, something like

Romary, perhaps ! A flush rose to Mary's cheek at the thought—what would the Cheviotts think of this marvellous news ? Would it increase or diminish the separation between them ? Was it possible that even yet all might come right between Lillas and Arthur Beverley, or had Lillas quite left off caring for him ? Was it—— ? Her speculations were suddenly brought to a close—a tap at the door reminded her of the present, and recalled her to the consideration of how and when she should first break this astonishing revelation to her parents.

“Consult with mamma,” Lillas had said. Yes, of course, that was the first thing to be done. But to get hold of her mother alone for an uninterrupted talk was by no means so easy as it seemed, just now especially, since Mr. Western's failing health had rendered him *exigeant* and

capricious in a way quite foreign to his ordinary character.

The tap at the door was repeated.

"Come in," cried Mary, starting up as she spoke.

"How can I when the door is locked?" said her mother's voice.

Mary hastened to unlock it.

"I am so sorry for keeping you waiting," she said, penitently, as she did so. "I had no idea it was you, mother."

"I have been looking for you all over the house, and began to think you must have gone out," said her mother, in a slightly aggrieved tone. "It is nearly tea-time, and I want to hasten it, for possibly a cup of tea may do your father good. It is about him I wanted you, Mary. He seems to me decidedly less well this evening, and I have just been wondering if we should not ask Dr. Brandreth to come to

see him to-morrow. The postman will be here directly. What do you think?"

"Would papa not mind?" said Mary, consideringly.

"I don't know—that is the difficulty. He is always pleased to see Dr. Brandreth, and often enjoys a talk with him; but whenever I have proposed it lately, he has begun worrying himself about the expense. Dr. Brandreth is very kind—to do any good to your father I know he would gladly come for nothing at all; but your father would not have that. He has always paid our doctor's charges to the full, and would be miserable not to do so. But it *can't* be helped; we are certainly unusually short of money just now, but where your father is concerned, Mary dear, I seem to grow reckless."

Mary had drawn her mother within the threshold of her room. They stood

talking near the doorway in low tones.

“If *that* is the only hesitation,” the girl replied, eagerly, with a suppressed excitement in her voice which, had she been a whit less pre-occupied, her mother could not but have noticed, “if that is the only difficulty, oh! mother dear, don’t hesitate an instant.”

Mrs. Western sighed. Her heart only too thoroughly agreed with Mary, but, alas! to her life-experience of poverty it seemed no longer unendurable and inconceivable, no longer anything but sadly inevitable that, even in such a matter as a question of health or sickness, possibly even of life or death, considerations of pounds, shillings, and pence should force themselves to the front. She only sighed and hesitated.

“Mother dear,” persisted Mary, “let me write to Dr. Brandreth at once. I

know it is right. And oh, mother, I have such wonderful news to tell you. I have a letter from Liliás—it was to read it quietly I had locked myself into my room. Mother, I don't know how to tell you what she has written about."

Mrs. Western's mind was still running on the fors and againsts of sending for Dr. Brandreth. She hardly took in the sense of Mary's words.

"A letter from Liliás!" she repeated. "Poor Lily, I am glad she is enjoying herself. But, Mary, if you really think we should send for Dr. Brandreth, there is no time to lose. Josey called out as I came upstairs that she heard Jacob's 'make-ready' whistle at the end of the lane, and when he whistles so far-off it's always a sign that he is in a hurry."

"Then he must just not be in a hurry," said Mary; "but all the same, mother, I'll

write the note at once. And, in the meantime, can't you try to guess what Liliás's letter is about?"

"It surely isn't that she has met Captain Beverley again," said Mrs. Western, anxiously, "or *surely* not that anyone else has taken a fancy to her? I never thought Liliás anything of a flirt, but——"

"Oh, no, mother dear, it is *nothing* of that sort," said Mary, as she ran downstairs before her mother. "Don't make yourself uneasy. I will tell you all as soon as I have sent off the note to Dr. Brandreth."

"We must have tea as soon as possible," replied her mother. "I will be getting it ready, Mary, and when you have sent the note, go into your father's study and try to get him to come into the dining-room. It will be better for him than sitting alone in the study when he is feeling ill."

“Very well,” said Mary. She could not bring herself to share her mother’s apprehensions, she was in a state of such excitement that the whole world seemed to have changed to her. Her father could not but get better and stronger now, mental anxiety, she felt certain, had far more to do with his failing health than anyone imagined.

Still when the note—less urgently worded, it must be owned, than had it been written to her mother’s dictation—was despatched, and she went to the study to seek her father, she felt a little startled. He was sitting in his chair by the fire, half dozing, it seemed to Mary, but when he looked up in answer to her greeting, she saw that his face looked changed somehow, its expression told of pain and oppression greater than he had yet endured.

“Is your head so bad, dear father?” she said, anxiously.

“Very, very bad indeed. I feel perfectly stupid with that sense of oppression, and my sight is so strangely hazy. I could not conceal it from your mother,” he went on, half apologetically, “though you know, my dear, how I always shrink from making her uneasy.”

“Yes,” said Mary, half absently, “I know. Will you come into the dining-room to tea, papa? Mamma sent me to fetch you.”

“Very well. If she wishes it, though I feel as if I would rather stay here. I hope the children will be quiet, poor things. I can’t stand any noise or excitement to-night.”

Mary looked at him as he spoke, and dismissed the half-formed idea—that, since she had been alone with her father, had

seized her with sudden temptation—of telling him the contents of the letter in her pocket, now, at once. She saw he spoke the truth. He was unfit to bear any great excitement.

Tea passed over with unwonted quiet. The “children” were impressed by their father’s weary looks, and conversation was carried on in unusually amicable whispers. After tea Mr. Western went back to his study, and Mary at last succeeded in getting her mother to herself.

“For a quarter of an hour only, dear,” said Mrs. Western. “Then I must take my work into the study and sit with your father. And I want to persuade him to go early to bed.”

“It is barely seven yet, mother,” said Mary. “Now listen—first of all, do you remember Lilius writing—of course you do—about having met a cousin of yours, a Mrs. Brabazon, in town?”

“At the doctor’s, wasn’t it? Waiting for Mr. Greville at the doctor’s, and your father was so pleased at it, and thought something might come of it—of course I remember,” replied Mrs. Western, growing interested. “Well, Mary?”

“Well, mother,” continued Mary, “Lilias’s letter is all about these relations of yours. She has met them again, they are at Hastings just now, and she has been to spend a day with them. And, mother,” she proceeded, cautiously, “it does indeed seem as if something were going to come of it. Do you happen to know, did you ever hear how the Brooke property is left—entailed, I suppose I should say?”

“In the usual way, entailed on to the eldest son. I have always known that,” said Mrs. Western, in some surprise.

“But *failing* an eldest son, mother, failing any direct male heir at all, do you—?”

Her question was never completed. At that moment a bell rang sharply and violently through the house. Mary and her mother stared at each other for a moment in silence. Bells were at no time in great request at the Rectory, and the sound of the special bell now heard seemed strange and unfamiliar.

“What can that be?” said Mary. “Some trick of the children’s, I am afraid. Wait here, mother ; I’ll go and see.”

She ran to the door, but before she had more than opened it her mother had overtaken her.

“Let me pass,” she whispered, in a hoarse, breathless voice—“let me go first, Mary. I know what it is. It is the study bell. Mary, your father——”

They rushed across the hall and down the study passage, together. Which first reached the door Mary never knew. But

between them it was thrown open and—ah, yes!—Mrs. Western's instinct was correct; the blow that for so long had threatened them had fallen at last—the Rector lay unconscious on the floor, and at the first glance Mary thought her mother was right when in agony she wailed out—"He is dead! Oh, Mary, he is dead!"

* * * * *

But he was not dead. They did what in their ignorance they could, poor things! and then, a quarter of an hour or so after the first alarm, Mary came rushing into the school-room, where the frightened children were all collected together.

"George, where is George?" she said. "He must go, or find some one to go, for the doctor. Simmons is out—it is always the way. But where is George? Can none of you tell me?"

"Oh, Mary, I am so sorry," said poor

Alexa. "I am afraid George has gone to bed. Have you forgotten about his sore knee? I don't think he *could* go for the doctor. Couldn't Josey and I go? Oh, dear! what shall we do?"

Mary for an instant wrung her hands in perplexity. It all came back to her memory about George's having hurt his knee by a fall from a tree the day before, hurt it badly too. What was to be done? The nearest possibility of a man and horse was a mile off, and even then *only* a possibility, hardly worth wasting precious time on the chance of. Simmons, their own factor, was out for the evening—what was to be done? Mary's quick mind glanced it all over and decided.

"Get my cloak and hat, quick, Josey—any of you," she said. "I know what I'll do. I'll run myself to The Edge and get Wills to go. He has a good horse, and

has often had to fetch Dr. Brandreth when Al—Miss Cheviott was there. Yes, that will be best, better than running a mile the other way on the mere chance of Giles Swanwick's being able to go."

She was off before anyone could stop her. But indeed it was the best thing to do. It was terrible to have to leave her mother alone with the silent, already in a strange sense, *unfamiliar* figure that Mary found it hard to believe could be "papa," but what might not delay or a bungled message result in? She only glanced in again to impress upon Martha, a fairly intelligent woman of her class, on *no* account to leave her mistress alone; if anything were wanted to call to Miss Alexa, or Miss Josephine, who would remain within earshot.

At the front door Mary was stopped by Alexa, trembling and pale with repressed

anxiety, yet, Mary was glad to see, crying but little.

“Tell me, Mary, dear Mary—forgive me for stopping you,” she said, breathlessly, “but do tell me, do you *think* he is going to die?”

“I don’t know—oh! Alexa, how can I tell?” said Mary. “Let me go, dear, and try all of you to be good. That’s the only thing you can do just now.”

“I will, indeed I will,” said Alexa, bravely, “and, Mary, you shall see a difference in me from this time, see if you don’t.”

Mary kissed her and hurried out.

“Perhaps there is really more strength and sense in Alexa than we have given her credit for,” she said to herself. It was a very tiny drop of comfort, still there was *some* in her young sister’s sympathy and evident desire to be of use. “For,” thought

Mary, "it is impossible not to recall all dear papa's forebodings—he has spoken so much of them lately, as to what would become of them all, and Alexa and Josey seemed as much on his mind as any, in case——"

She stopped suddenly as there flashed across her mind the recollection of Liliás's letter, which by some strange brain freak the new excitement of the last half-hour had completely banished from her memory. Could it still be true—this wonderful news which so short a time ago had seemed to illumine the dark future so brilliantly and scatter every cloud? *Could* it be true?

"And what if it be?" thought Mary, recklessly, a sob rising in her throat. "What shall we care for money or comfort without *him*? What a mockery it seems coming *now* when the greatest sorrow of

our lives is upon us ! What madness it seems ever to have murmured at our small means or privations or difficulties or anything while we were all together and well ! Oh, to think that only the last time I walked down this lane I was grumbling to myself at the home worries and the children's troublesomeness and the monotonous common-placeness of my life ! If only we were back at all that——if only——would I *ever* grumble again ?”

The tears *would* come. Mary ran faster in hopes of driving them away and preserving the self-possession which she felt she dared not lose, and other ten minutes brought her to The Edge. She knew the ins and outs of the place so well that without knocking she quickly found her way into the kitchen, where Mrs. Wills was busy ironing. The familiar kitchen—how little she had thought the last time she

saw it, on what an errand she would next be there !

This errand was soon told, and Mrs. Wills was full of sympathy. But sympathy, alas ! was all she had to give, and Mary was in sore need of something more. It was terribly disappointing to find that Wills himself was not at home, nor likely to be for some hours to come. On his return from Withenden he had ridden on to Bewley, a village some miles the other way, about a horse buying or selling, or some business of the kind, which, rendered diffusive by her excitement, Mrs. Wills would have given Mary the whole details of, had not the girl cut her short with an anguished exclamation,

“ What am I to do ? What *can* I do ? ” she cried. “ They are all depending on me to find some way—mamma and all—

and even now he may be dying. Oh, Mrs. Wills !”

Mrs. Wills wiped away her tears with one corner of her apron, while she stopped to consider.

“There’s neither man nor boy about this blessed place to-night, as ill-luck would have it,” she said. “I would offer to run myself, and gladly, but I’m not as quick as when I was younger, Miss Mary. But stay—there’s Farmer Bartlemoor’s not more than a mile and a quarter away, where there’s sure to be one of the sons at home and plenty of horses. To be sure, it’s not exactly on the way to Withenden, but not so far about neither. Do you know it, miss?—Bartle’s farm, I mean? Bartles we calls them mostly for shorter.”

“No,” said Mary, “I don’t. But tell me and I am sure I can find it.”

Mrs. Wills's description recalled the place to Mary's recollection. The Bartlemoors were not her father's parishioners, but she remembered noticing the house, a rather picturesque old-fashioned one, in some of the long Summer rambles the Rectory children were so fond of.

It was not yet quite dark when again she set out. But had it been the blackest of midnights, little, save for the increased difficulty and delay, would Mary have cared. She hurried on, trying hard not to think, not to distract herself by picturing what might at that moment be happening at the Rectory. It seemed to her that she had implicitly followed Mrs. Wills's directions, yet the landmarks she was on the look-out for were strangely long of coming. It was all but dark now—the road, hardly indeed worthy of the name, along which she was hastening was perfectly

bare of any sign of human habitation, she had met no one since she left The Edge, not a single belated market-cart even had passed her, and now, as Mary stood still in despair, she noticed that the clouds, which all the evening had been gathering ominously together, had joined their phalanxes—there was no longer a break in the sky—the rain began slowly but steadily, in five minutes it was a perfect pour.

Mechanically almost, poor Mary crept under a tree and stood still to think what she should do. Where indeed was the use of hurrying on, when every step, for all she knew, might but be taking her further and further in the wrong direction? It was too evident she had lost her way. What she would have done she often afterwards asked herself, if, at that moment, the sound of wheels approaching rapidly in her direction had not caught

her ears. *Too* rapidly indeed was her next fear—how, amidst the pouring rain and the darkness, could she attract the driver's attention? She ran forward—yes, to her delight the vehicle, whatever it was, had lamps! Could it possibly, by any blessed chance, be Dr. Brandreth himself returning from a country round? Any way, whoever and whatever it was, she must do her utmost to attract attention. And as Mary said this to herself there flashed across her memory a gruesome legend of the neighbourhood, which many a night, when a child, had made her put her fingers in her ears for terror of what she might hear—a legend of a certain Sir Ingram de Romary who, maddened by wine and some wild quarrel, had driven himself and his horse to destruction over the Chaldron waterfall, a mile or more the other side of Hathercourt. All the way

from Romary Dene, an old ruin now long given up to the owls and bats, the mad race had been run, and still on wild, dark, stormy nights "folks said 'twas to be heard again."

Mary, standing in the road, shivered as the story rushed through her brain—shivered with strange nervous terror, for which, at the same moment, she vigorously despised herself.

"Papa dying," she said to herself, "and I to be frightened of a ridiculous ghost story! What can I be made of? Have I no heart?"

Afterwards she did herself more justice. A strong excitement may, indeed, override every other sensation, but it may also, by some slightest variation, kindle every perception, every nerve, every feeler, so to speak, of our Briareus-like imagination into abnormal acuteness. Who can-

not but recall with astonishing minuteness the trifling outside details of any scene morbidly impressed on our memory—the pattern on the walls above the bed where our best-beloved lay dying, the details of the dress of the indifferent messenger who brought us that news we can never forget? Who cannot but remember the wild, even ludicrous, vagaries that flashed through our fancy at some “supreme moment” of our lives?

But, shiver as she might, Mary had already committed herself to action. She stood some little way forward on the road, and, as the gig, dog-cart, whatever it was, came within hail, she called out, as loudly as she could, the first thing that came into her head to say—

“Is that you, Dr. Brandreth?”

She could not at first have been heard. There was no visible abatement of the

driver's speed. Again, and yet again, Mary repeated her cry, but apparently with no effect. On flew the wheels, down poured the rain. Mary was obliged, to save herself the risk of being knocked down as it passed her, to draw back a little.

"It surely must be Sir Ingram, after all," she said to herself, but with no terror this time, with rather a wild, incomprehensible desire to laugh. But as the vehicle actually drew near her, as the lamps flashed into her face, common-sense and self-possession returned.

"Oh, stop—stop!" she cried, "for mercy's sake, whoever you are, stop!"

This last appeal, though she knew it not, was unneeded. Already the pace had been slackening, but it was not so easy, as might appear, suddenly to pull up a powerful, fast-trotting horse instinctively sharing

its master's desire to get home and out of the storm of rain as fast as possible. But two or three yards beyond the spot where Mary stood it was achieved. There were two men on the dog-cart, one driving, the other sitting behind. Almost before the horse stopped, the latter jumped down and was at its head.

"What can it be?" said the driver, as the man ran past him. "Yes, stay you by Madge, Andrew, or we shall have her getting excited. I'll get down."

Andrew, to tell the truth, was by no means averse to do as he was told. Madge's kicks and plunges impressed him infinitely less than a hand-to-hand or face-to-face encounter with a ghost, or, failing a ghost, a lunatic escaped from the county asylum, which was the next idea presented to his bucolic brain. And, to do him justice, Mary might reasonably

enough have been mistaken for the latter, if not for the former, as she stood in the pouring rain, umbrellaless, hatless even, at first sight; for, habitually careful, she had, when the rain first came on, half unconsciously drawn over her head the hood of the large waterproof cloak with which, most fortunately, she had enveloped herself for her run to The Edge. And from under this curious head-dress gleamed out her white face and bright (unnaturally bright with anxiety and excitement) brown eyes, looking almost black in the flashing light of the lamps—different, how different, from the sunny hazel eyes that had looked up in Mr. Cheviott's face, half shyly, but all frankly, that Sunday morning in the old church porch!

They looked up now with a wild yet most piteous beseeching in their gaze. There was no need for Madge's master to

get down from his seat to question this strange suppliant. Before he could move she had run up to the side of the wheel, and before he could speak she had, so far, told her story.

“I have lost my way,” she said, “and, oh! I shall be so grateful if you can help me. Can you tell me if I am anywhere near Farmer Bartlemoor’s? You must forgive my stopping you. I did not know *what* to do.”

And for all answer, the man she was addressing sprang down at one bound to her side, exclaiming,

“Mary! You here? You poor child, what is—what can be the matter?”

CHAPTER VI.

AN ACT OF COMMON HUMANITY.

“. . . and now thy pardon, friend,
 For thou hast ever answered courteously,
 And wholly bold thou art, and meek withal
 As any of Arthur’s best : . . .
 . . . I marvel what thou art.”
 “Damsel,” he said, “ye be not all to blame,
 . . . Ye said your say ;
 Mine answer was my deed. Good sooth ! I hold
 He scarce is knight, yea but half-man . . .
 . . . he, who lets
 His heart be stirred with any foolish heat
 At any gentle damsel’s waywardness.”

Gareth and Lynette.

HER eyes gleamed up into his face.
 But for a moment or two she did not
 speak. The inclination was so desperately

strong upon her to burst into tears that she felt if she attempted to answer him, if she even moved her gaze or allowed a muscle of her face to quiver, it would have been all over with her self-control. He, on his side, stood watching her closely; he did not like the strained, unnatural expression, and thought for a moment that when it relaxed it would be into something worse—he thought she was going to faint, and half stretched out his arms as if to catch her. Mary saw the action, and it restored her self-possession.

“I *won't* be a fool,” she murmured to herself, “wasting all this precious time with my nonsense,” though in reality barely three minutes had passed since the sound of the wheels had first reached her.

Then she gave herself a sort of little admonitory shake, and, turning again to

Mr. Cheviott, spoke in a more natural, but yet evidently excited tone.

“I will explain it all,” she said, and so she did. Her father’s symptoms of increasing weakness and the note to Dr. Brandreth, then the sudden seizure and the difficulty of obtaining a messenger, ending with her own failure at The Edge and Mrs. Wills’s suggestion.

“And now,” she said, “if only you can tell me where I am, or if your man knows Farmer Bartlemoor’s, it will be all right, and I shall be so very grateful to you.”

But to her surprise Mr. Cheviott did not at once reply, nor did he turn to “Andrew” for information. Instead of this, he took out his watch, and, examining it by the light of the lamp, murmured something to himself.

“Five miles—twenty minutes,” he said, “yes, that would be far the quickest.”

Then he turned to Mary.

“Miss Western,” he said, gravely, “you are getting as wet as you possibly can. I must drive you to some shelter. Shall I take you back to The Edge, or home?”

“Oh, no, no,” cried Mary. “*Don’t* mind me. I entreat you not to mind me. If you have time to drive anywhere, if I dare ask you such an unheard-of thing, drive me to the nearest point to Dr. Brandreth’s. I feel as if I could not go to the Bartlemoors, they don’t know me, and my head is growing so confused, I am not sure that I should know what to say when I got there.”

He had half expected this—it hardly seemed possible to oppose her—and the risk to herself, if greater in one way seemed less in another.

“Well, then,” he said, “will you do exactly as I tell you?”

"Yes," she replied, meekly, "exactly."

"Your cloak is waterproof, I see," he continued, "is your dress dry underneath it?"

"Quite," she answered, "and my boots are thick, and it has not been raining long."

Mr. Cheviott turned to the carriage, from which he extracted a large, soft, woolly rug.

"Loosen your cloak for a moment," he said, "and put this thing on under it, then your cloak again. Now, can you climb up to the front beside me? I am driving."

Mary managed it, almost without assistance, and Mr. Cheviott followed her. But, just as the groom was about to leave the horse's head, a sudden giddiness came over her, and she swayed forward for a second. Mr. Cheviott caught her with

his left arm, and called to the man to stay where he was for a moment.

“Miss Western,” he said, in a low voice, “you are perfectly exhausted. It is not right of me to let you go farther.”

She placed both hands on his arm.

“Oh, yes, yes,” she pleaded. “Anything rather than losing more time by taking me home first. It was only for a moment—I am better now.”

“Andrew,” called out Mr. Cheviott, “where is my flask?”

“In the left-hand inside pocket, sir,” was the reply, “the pocket of your light top-coat, sir—not of the ulster.”

In a moment the flask was forthcoming, a small quantity poured into the silver cup and held to Mary’s lips.

“No, thank you,” she said, calmly. “I never take wine.”

Mr. Cheviott felt almost inclined to laugh.

"It is not wine, as it happens," he replied. "It is brandy and water. But, if it were wine, it wouldn't matter. You promised to do as you were told."

"Brandy," repeated Mary, "I *cannot* take that. It will go to my head."

"It will not," said Mr. Cheviott. "Now, Miss Western, don't be silly. Drink it."

She did so.

"Was there ever such a girl before?" said Mr. Cheviott, speaking audibly enough though as if to himself. "Such a mixture of strength and childishness, common sense and uncommon fancifulness! Oh, Miss Western!"

Mary, in turn, could hardly help laughing.

"Now," he went on, "if you feel giddy

again—you very likely will when we start—don't say it's the brandy. I cannot keep my arm round you," Mary started up indignantly, she had forgotten that all this time, through the episode of the flask and all, the arm had been there,—“I cannot keep my arm round you,” he continued, coolly, though perfectly aware of the start, “because I am going to drive. I cannot trust my man to drive this mare, and I cannot let you sit behind with him. So promise me, if you feel giddy, to take hold of my arm for yourself. It will not interfere with my driving, and a very light hold will keep you firm.”

“Very well,” said Mary, meekly enough to outward hearing, though, in her heart, a vow was registered that, short of feeling herself falling bodily out of the carriage, nothing should induce her to resort to such assistance.

"I shall drive slowly, at first," said Mr. Cheviott, "as the mare is already a little excited. But it will not really lose any time to speak of. I was driving foolishly fast when I met you, but then I had only my own neck to think of."

"And Andrew's," suggested Mary.

"And Andrew's," he repeated. "But Andrew is experienced in the art of taking care of his neck. I never saw anyone with a greater knack of keeping out of damage than he has."

Was he talking for talking's sake, or with the intention of setting her at her ease by showing her how completely so he was himself? Mary felt a little puzzled. Thoroughly at ease he certainly was, and, more than this, he seemed to her to be in remarkably good spirits, yet his next observation showed her how far from indiffer-

ent he was feeling to the anxiety that she was suffering.

“I fancy we shall just catch Brandreth,” he said, “and you will find no time has been lost. This is his whist club night, and it was to be at old Admiral Maxton’s. They break up at nine, I know—the Admiral is so very old—so the doctor will be just about getting home.”

“Are you going to take me all the way to Withenden?” said Mary, half timidly.

“*Certainly*,” replied Mr. Cheviott, decidedly. “Now, Andrew, let her go. All right.”

But just at first it seemed to Mary more like “all wrong.” With a plunge and a dash that nearly took her breath away, the impatient animal darted forward. How Andrew managed to scramble into his seat was a mystery to Mary. It was all she could do to keep hers; the same giddy

feeling came over her, her head reeled, and, with a vague remembrance of Mr. Cheviott's injunction, she caught hold of his arm to steady herself. He was prepared for the movement, and by no means discomposed by it. In a minute or two the mare settled down into a steady pace, and Mary's head grew steady.

She quietly withdrew her hand.

"I beg your pardon," she said, somewhat stiffly.

"Not at all," replied Mr. Cheviott, "it's what I told you to do. But don't be frightened of Madge—it's only a little show-off; we quite understand each other."

"Thank you," said Mary, imagining a patronising shade in his tone. "I was not the least frightened; I am not nervous."

"No, you are not, but you are *human*, Miss Western, and what you have gone through to-night has been enough to

try anyone's nerves," said Mr. Cheviott, gravely.

Mary did not reply, though she felt herself ungracious for not doing so. In a minute he went on again.

"I have been thinking," he said, "of what you told me about your father. Of course I am no doctor, but I believe I can give you a little comfort. This sort of seizure is not so alarming when it comes on, as in his case, gradually; it is not like a man in too good health—a great full-blooded fellow like Squire Cleave, for instance—do you know him?—being struck down suddenly. Your father, as a rule, is so equable, is he not? and lives so quietly and regularly. I *fancy* he will get over it, and be much the same as usual again. Of course it is serious, but I have a friend at this moment who had an attack of this kind ten years ago, and is now

fairly well and able to enjoy life ; of course he is obliged to be careful."

What a load was lifted from Mary's heart ! To be allowed to *hope*—what a relief ! The tears rushed to her eyes, they were in her voice as she replied—

"Oh, how good you are ! Thank you, thank you for telling me that," and in *his* turn Mr. Cheviott made no reply.

"Freedom from anxiety, from daily worry—he has had too much of that—would be greatly in his favour, would it not ?" Mary added, after a little pause.

"Undoubtedly, I should say," said Mr. Cheviott, recalling as he spoke the careworn expression of the Rector's face as he had last seen him. "Peculiarly so in his case, I should say. He is a very sensitive man, is he not ?"

"Very," said Mary, "but not in the sense of being irritable. He is very

sweet-tempered. Poor father," she went on, with a sudden burst of confidence which amazed herself, "he has had far too much anxiety; but if only he gets well, I think and believe that that can be—is going to be cured."

"What can she mean?" thought Mr. Cheviott, one or two possible solutions of her words darting through his mind. But what she did not tell he of course could not ask, only just then a sudden and unnecessary touch of the whip made Madge start again.

They were close to Withenden by now. Dr. Brandreth's house stood a little out of the town on the side by which they were entering it. Mr. Cheviott drew up.

"Suppose we wait here," he said. "Andrew can be thoroughly trusted to deliver exactly any message you give him, and it might be—perhaps you would not

care about clambering up and down again from that high seat?"

Mary's cheeks grew hot, dark as it was. She did not know whether to be angry or grateful, whether indignantly to declare her indifference to Withenden gossip or to choose, as her conductor evidently wished to suggest, "discretion as the better part of valour." A moment's reflection decided her that, considering all he had done and was doing, she had no right to reject the suggestion.

"Thank you," she said, and, turning to the groom, gave a distinct message, short and to the point. "My letter will be at Dr. Brandreth's before now," she added to Mr. Cheviott, "and that will explain a little. It was asking him to come early to-morrow."

"That message is all you have to give," said Andrew's master, as the man

was hastening off. "You need not say who brought it, or anything."

"But, Mr. Cheviott," said Mary, half timidly, half indignantly, "I would not mind all Withenden knowing I had brought it. And—and your driving me here was really an act of pure humanity; no one could say I had done anything in the least not—not nice."

Her voice quivered a little.

"Certainly not. But don't you think sometimes—we must take the world as we find it, you know—sometimes it is just as well to give 'no one' the power to say good, bad, or indifferent about what we do?" said Mr. Cheviott, very gently.

"Perhaps," said Mary, more humbly than was usual with her. Then she added, "It was not nice of me to say that—about your kindness being an act of pure humanity. I didn't mean—I only

meant—I don't know what I meant, but I am very, very much obliged to you."

"But you have no reason to be. It was, as you said, just an act of common humanity," said Mr. Cheviott, with slight bitterness.

"‘Pure,’ I said, not ‘common,’" corrected Mary.

"Well, it's all the same. How can I think you will consider it even an act of friendliness? You won't have us for your friends. And even if I were ten times the unmitigated ruffian you believe me to be," he added, with a slight laugh, "would it not be an immense pleasure to me to return in the slightest degree your goodness to Alys? You do believe I care for her, I think? I am grateful, most grateful, to you and to the dark night, and to the chance that made me choose that way home, for making it possible

for me to be of the least service to you."

"Mr. Cheviott," said Mary, impulsively, "whatever you are, you have behaved most generously to *me*. It was very good of you to come to papa—after—after all I said."

"Thank you," he said, in a low voice.

"I wish," she added, as if speaking to herself, "*I wish* I could understand you. I hate to do anyone injustice."

"And what if you found that you had done such to me?" he asked, eagerly.

"*Of course* I would own myself in the wrong, if I saw that I had been," she replied, proudly, and Mr. Cheviott could *feel* that her head was thrown back with the gesture peculiar to her at times.

"And then?"

"You would—you would forgive me, I

suppose," she said, lightly, but with a slight nervousness in her voice. Mr. Cheviott was silent. Mary seemed impelled to go on speaking. "On the whole," she said, "I think I shall register your kindness to-night as an act of great generosity. Will that do better?"

"As you please," Mr. Cheviott replied, drily, but, it seemed to Mary, sadly too. And she was right.

"How *can* she ever see that she did me injustice?" he was saying to himself. "I can never explain things—it is madness to imagine I can ever be cleared."

Andrew's report was most satisfactory. Dr. Brandreth had just come in, and would start at once. The order for his dog-cart had been sent out while the man stood at the door.

"Then," said Mr. Cheviott, "the faster

we get back to Hathercourt the better. You would like to be there before Brandreth arrives?"

"Very much," said Mary.

"Will not your mother have been very uneasy about you?" he added.

"I hope not. I *think* not," said Mary, anxiously. "She may have been too absorbed about papa to think of me. And she knows the difficulty. Very likely she thought I was waiting at The Edge till Wills came back again. But, Mr. Cheviott, you are not meaning to take me home all the way?"

"What else, what less could I possibly do?" he replied, bluntly.

"Will not your sister be dreadfully uneasy at your being so late?" she asked.

"No, she does not expect me to-night at all—at least, I left it uncertain," Mr.

Cheviott replied. "I have been hunting over near Parkingham to-day. It is nearly the last meet of the season, and Alys begged me not to miss it. Then I dined at Cleavelands, half intending to sleep there. But I found there was going to be a dance after dinner, and—somehow I don't care for that sort of thing, especially without Alys. So I came away."

No one certainly could have to-night accused Mr. Cheviott of stiffness or uncommunicativeness.

"How is Alys?" asked Mary.

"Better, on the whole, better, but it is slow work," said Mr. Cheviott, with a little sigh. A sigh, partly of brotherly anxiety, partly of regret for the additional complications this accident of his sister's had brought into his own and others' lives. "It may be years before she is thoroughly well again," he added, and Mary, feeling

that there was little she could say in the way of comfort, was silent.

“Can your horse take you all the way home again to-night?” she said, presently.

“I think so. If not, I daresay I can put up for the night at Beverley’s farm,” he said, carelessly, adding, with a slight change of tone, “our old quarters.”

The allusion, somehow, made Mary feel nervous again. In her eagerness to change the subject she flung herself off Scylla into Charybdis—in homelier terms, “out of the frying-pan into the fire.”

“Do you know what came into my head when I first saw you driving so fast up that lane?” she said, with a slight laugh.

“No,” he replied. “You did not know who it was. I think you first fancied I was Dr. Brandreth, did you not?”

“I thought it just possible. But that is not what I meant. I could not help

having a foolish wild sort of fancy that perhaps you were Sir Ingram de Romary—you know the story?”

“The fellow that pitched himself over the Chaldron Falls,” said Mr. Cheviott. “Yes, I remember. Your fancies about me are the reverse of complimentary, do you know, Miss Western? The last time you had any such, if I remember right, you took me for the ghost of that other still more disreputable Romary, the fellow that forced an unfortunate “heathen Chinees” girl to marry him, and then abused her so that she threw herself out of the window of the haunted room.”

“Mr. Cheviott!” said Mary, reproachfully, her cheeks glowing at the remembrance of that day.

And Mr. Cheviott was merciful enough to say no more.

They drove back to Hathercourt very

fast. So fast that when they drew up at the Rectory gates there was as yet no sound of Dr. Brandreth's wheels in the distance.

"Will you let me get down here, please?" said Mary. "I don't want to make them think it is the doctor, as they would only feel disappointed."

Mr. Cheviott got down and helped Mary out of the carriage.

"Would you mind *my* waiting here an instant?" he said, with some hesitation. "Dr. Brandreth cannot be here for five or ten minutes yet, and I should be so glad to hear how your father is, and if I can be of any more use."

"I will run back and tell you—in a moment," said Mary.

There was no need for her to ring or knock at the hall door. It was on the latch as she had left it, and in a moment,

at the sound of her opening it, Alexa, George, and Josey appeared.

"Oh! Mary, we have been *so* frightened about you," they began.

"But first tell me how papa is," she interrupted.

"Better, a little better. He opened his eyes and smiled at mamma, and now he seems to be sleeping, really sleeping, not in that dreadful sort of way," said Alexa.

Mary gave a sigh of thankfulness.

"Run in and tell mamma Dr. Brandreth will be here in five minutes. Has she been very frightened about me?"

"No, dear, we wouldn't let her," said Alexa, re-assuringly. "We told her you might have to wait at The Edge till Wills came back, it was raining so."

"That was *very* good and sensible of you," said Mary, at which commendation

poor Alexa's white face grew rosy with pleasure.

"But aren't you coming in to mamma, Mary?" she said, seeing that her sister, after disentangling herself from a mysterious fluffy shawl in which she was wrapped, was turning away to the door.

"Immediately," said Mary. "I am only running back to the gate with this rug, to return it to the—the person that lent it me, and who drove me to Withenden."

"All the way? How very good-natured! What a way you have been! And what a lovely rug. Is that Mrs. Wills's? Surely not," they all said at once. But Mary wisely paid no heed, she ran to the gate and back again almost before she was missed.

"This is your rug, Mr. Cheviott," she said, breathlessly, "and thank you for it so much, and thank you for everything.

And papa is already a very little better, they think."

"I am so glad," he said, cordially. "But, Miss Western, how exceedingly foolish of you to have taken off the rug and run out again into the cold without it!"

Mary laughed.

"I am very hardy," she said, as she ran off again. "Good night, and thank you again."

But Mr. Cheviott stopped her for an instant.

"Is there nothing I can do to help you?" he asked.

"Nothing—nothing *more*, I should say," she replied.

"And—Miss Western, you are not going to sit up all night," he went on—"promise me you will not; you are not fit for it, and that is not the way to prepare yourself for, perhaps, weeks of nursing."

"I am truly *quite* rested and fresh," she said. "It is very kind of you to think of it. I shall not do anything foolish. Good night again."

He did not and had not attempted to shake hands, nor had Mary offered to do so.

"He refused my hand the last time I offered it," she said to herself. "But on the whole, perhaps, what wonder?"

Dr. Brandreth, approaching Hathercourt some ten minutes later, was surprised to meet a dog-cart driving off in an opposite direction. But it passed too quickly for even his quick eyes to identify it.

"Whose trap can that be?" he said to his boy.

"Dunno, sir. Not so very unlike the Romary dog-cart neither," was the reply.

"Impossible!" said the doctor. And in

his own mind he wondered why Mary Western had not prosecuted the acquaintanceship with the Cheviotts, so strangely begun.

“It would be a good thing for those girls to make some friends for themselves,” he thought to himself. “Nice as they are, I don’t altogether understand them; they don’t give themselves airs—the very reverse, yet for all that I suspect they are too proud for their own advantage. And if poor Western is really breaking up, goodness only knows what is to become of them !”

* * * * *

Early, very early the next morning, Mr. Cheviott’s groom made his appearance at the Rectory to make inquiry, with his master’s compliments, for Mr. Western. At the door he was met by “the young lady herself,” coming out for the refresh-

ment of a breath of the sweet Spring air, all the sweeter for the last night's heavy rains.

“And she told me to tell you, sir, with Mrs. Western's compliments, as how the Rector was better than might have been expected, and as how the doctor gives good hopes.”

So “Sir Ingram de Romary” drove home again, and sympathising Alys heard with eager interest of her friend's new troubles, and longed more than ever to see Mary Western again.

CHAPTER VII.

ALYS PUTS TWO AND TWO TOGETHER.

“I shall as now do more for you
Than longeth to womanhede.”

The Nut-brown Mayd.

“MR. WESTERN is not so well, I hear,” said Mr. Cheviott to his sister one afternoon, a fortnight or so after the Rector of Hathercourt’s first seizure.

Alys started up from the invalid-couch on which she was lying. The brother and sister were in a small morning-room which Alys sometimes called her “boudoir,” though its rather heterogeneous furniture

and contents hardly realised the ideas suggested by the word.

"I am so dreadfully sorry," she exclaimed. "I had a note from Mary yesterday, saying he was so much better."

"These cases are sadly deceptive," said Miss Winstanley, who was knitting by the window, consolingly. "At Mr. Western's age I should think it extremely doubtful if he recovers. I know two or three almost similar cases that ended fatally, though just at first the doctors thought hopefully of them."

"How did you hear it, Laurence?" said Alys. "You didn't send over to-day to inquire, did you?"

"No. Arthur told me. He said that he had met Brandreth on the road somewhere on his way back from The Edge," said Mr. Cheviott, strolling to the window, where he remained standing, looking out.

"I wish you would ask him to come and tell me *exactly* what Dr. Brandreth said," Alys asked.

"He is not in—he went over to the stables a few minutes ago. I'll tell him to come and speak to you when he comes back. But I feel sure that was all he heard," replied Mr. Cheviott, without manifesting any surprise at Alys's extreme interest in the matter.

"I wonder if they have sent for Miss Western—Lilias, the eldest one, I mean," soliloquised Alys. "Mary said they hoped not to need to do so, as there was some difficulty about her coming home sooner than had been fixed. Poor Mary, how much she must have had to do, and she *never* thinks of herself or takes any rest. I *wish* I could do anything to help her!"

Mr. Cheviott turned from the window to the fire, and began poking it vigorously.

“Excuse me, Laurence,” said Miss Winstanley, plaintively. “I think the fire’s quite hot enough: it is such a very close evening for April.”

Mr. Cheviott laughed and desisted.

“I am out of place in this room,” he said. “I am always doing something clumsy. I’ll send Arthur instead—he’s a much better tame cat than I.”

He turned to leave the room.

“By-the-by, Alys,” he said, putting his head in at the door again, “you had better make much of Arthur while you have him. He says he must leave the day after to-morrow.”

“And he only came yesterday,” said Alys, regretfully. “It’s too bad—only two days.”

“Three, my dear,” corrected her aunt. “We arrived the day before yesterday. Arthur left Cirencester on Tuesday, and

slept Tuesday night in my house, and this is Friday."

"Well, it's much the same," said Alys. "He might stay a little longer. He's always so busy now. Why should he have taken such a craze for hard work? It doesn't suit him at all."

"My dear!" said Miss Winstanley, reprovingly. "How can you say such a thing? In his circumstances his friends cannot be too thankful that he has taken to some useful employment, which will do him no harm either way, however things turn out."

Alys pricked up her ears.

"How do you mean 'in his circumstances,' aunt? How are his circumstances different from Laurence's, or any other man's who has a place and a good income?"

"Oh! I don't know, my dear," said Miss Winstanley, evasively. "I told you once

before, I don't know all about Arthur's affairs. One, two, three—I am so afraid I have got a row too much—by-the-by, my dear, I wish you wouldn't talk so much about those Westerns. I warned you of it last year. Laurence does not like them, and the mention of them always irritates him.”

“It was Laurence himself who first mentioned them, as it happens,” said Alys, not too respectfully, it must be confessed.

“Ah, yes, but you said a great deal more, and, as I said last year——”

“Last year and this are very different, aunt,” said Alys. “Have you forgotten all that Mary Western did for me? No one has recognised it more fully than Laurence.”

“Ah, well, perhaps so. But still he does not *like* them. Did you not see how he made some excuse for going away, when you would go on talking about them?”

"It was no such thing. It was you fidgeting him about the fire when he was really concerned about Mr. Western," muttered Alys, but too low for her aunt to catch the words. And Miss Winstanley relapsed into her "one, two, three, four," and for a few minutes there was silence.

Then Alys returned to the charge.

"By what you said just now about Arthur's uncertain circumstances, did you mean the peculiar terms of his father's will?" she said, demurely.

"Oh, yes, of course, I suppose so, but I wish you would not ask me. I am very stupid about wills and all sorts of law things," said Miss Winstanley, floundering about helplessly beneath her niece's diplomatic cross-questioning. "I only meant that for a man who can't marry and settle down it is an excellent thing to have some employment."

“And why shouldn’t he marry and settle down?” said Alys. “He will come into his property in two years, when I am twenty-one—I always remember it by that—and till that he could have a good allowance to live on. Why shouldn’t he marry, poor fellow? I think it very hard lines that he shouldn’t.”

“But—” began Miss Winstanley.

“But, aunt,” said Alys, who was “working herself up” on a subject she was at all times inclined to grow rather hot about, “I really mean what I say. It is the only one thing I have ever really felt inclined to quarrel with Laurence for. I can tell you that Arthur has been much nearer marrying than you have any idea of, and——”

It was Miss Winstanley’s turn to interrupt. “My dear!” she exclaimed, letting her

knitting-needles fall on her lap in her excitement, "you don't mean to say that he—that you—you won't be twenty-one for two years."

"What *do* you mean, aunt?" said Alys. "What has my being or not being twenty-one to do with Arthur's marrying?"

Miss Winstanley looked as if she were going to cry.

"Why will you always begin about this subject, Alys?" she said, pathetically. "I thought you meant——"

"Well, tell me that, any way," said Alys. "You must tell me what you thought I meant."

"Oh, nothing. I must have mistaken you. It was only when you said that about his having thought of marrying—before your accident, of course—and I knew he took it so much to heart, but of course

that was natural on all accounts," said Miss Winstanley, confusedly.

Alys sat bolt up on her couch, thereby setting all her doctor's orders at defiance. A red spot glowed on each cheek, her eyes were sparkling. Miss Winstanley could see that she was growing very excited—the thing of all others to be avoided for her!—and the poor lady's alarm and distress added to her nervousness and confusion.

"Now, aunt," said Alys, calmly, "you *must* tell me what I want to know. I am not so blind and childish as you have all imagined. I have known for a good while that there was some strange complication which was putting everything wrong, in which, somehow, *I* was concerned. Don't make yourself unhappy by thinking it has been all your doing that I have come to know anything about it. It

has been no one person's doing; it has just been that I have 'put two and two together' for myself."

"Alys," ejaculated her aunt, "what an expression for you to use!"

"It expresses what I mean," said Alys, pushing back the hair off her throbbing temples. "And since I have been ill I have had so much time for thinking and wondering and puzzling out things—and I think I have become quicker, cleverer, in a way, than I used to be. I seem as if I could almost guess at things by magic, sometimes. Now, aunt, what I want to know is *this*—is Arthur's future, in any way, dependent on *me*, or anything I may or may not do?"

"Had you not better ask Laurence?" said Miss Winstanley, tremulously, driven, at last, hopelessly into a corner.

"No, it would be no use. There is

something that he is, in some way, debarred from telling me, I am sure, otherwise he would have told me, for he has no love of mystery or secrecy. And *yet* I feel equally sure that it is something that can only be put straight by my knowing it."

Miss Winstanley sat silent, a picture of bewildered distress.

"Aunt," said Alys again, after a short pause, her cheeks and brow flushing to the roots of her hair, "what I am going to ask you I don't like to put in words—it seems to me such an altogether repulsive, unnatural idea, but, as you won't speak without, I *must* ask you. Has all this trouble anything to do with my marrying some one, anyone in particular? You told me once that Uncle Beverley, Arthur's father, was extraordinarily fond of me when I was a baby, and that he would have done anything to show his gratitude to my mother

for what she had done for him. Now, aunt, has this anything to do with the peculiar terms of his will, which I have very often heard alluded to?"

"I have never seen the will; believe me, Alys, I do not know its exact terms," Miss Winstanley pleaded.

"Well, I daresay you don't, aunt. But you know enough to throw a little daylight on *my* part of it. Aunt, is it, *can* it be that Arthur's inheriting his father's property—his *own* property—depends on his marrying *me*?"

Her voice quivered and fell—a whole army of contending feelings were at war within her as she waited breathlessly for Miss Winstanley's reply.

"No, not exactly," she said, trying, as usual, to shelter herself behind vague and indefinite answers, "if *you* did not want to marry *him*, he would not be punished for

that. Now, Alys, this is all I can say. I am going away upstairs to my own room, to avoid any more talk of this kind."

Miss Winstanley rose from her seat, nervously tugging at her shawl which, as usual, had dropped far below her waist as she got up.

Alys took no notice of her last sentence.

"If *I* don't want to marry *him*, he will be none the worse," she repeated, slowly, "but if *he* doesn't want to marry me—what then? That would be a different story! Thank you, aunt; on the whole, I think you have told me enough, so you may stay downstairs without fear. I am not going to ask any more questions."

Her tone was cool and composed enough, yet, on the whole, Miss Winstanley would rather have had her more visibly angry. There was a gleam in her eyes and a scorching spot on each cheek which her

aunt had not for long seen there. "Alys was very hot-tempered as a child," she was wont to say of her, "but of late years she had calmed down wonderfully."

"No, Alys, I don't want to stay downstairs, thank you," she replied, reprovingly, tugging harder than ever at the front of the recalcitrant shawl, her efforts in some mysterious way only resulting in a more tantalising descent behind.

Alys made no reply.

"To think," she was muttering to herself, "to think how all this time I have been kept in the dark! How like a fool I have behaved! Laurence might have warned me *somehow*—however he was bound down not to tell me. He had better have tried to upset the will on the ground of Uncle Beverley's being mad, which he certainly must have been!"

Two minutes after Miss Winstanley left the room Captain Beverley entered it.

“Alys,” he said, as he came in, “Laurence said you wanted me, so here I am. Why, what’s the matter, child?” he added, with a quick change of tone as he caught sight of her face. She was not crying, but her cheeks were burning and her eyes gleaming, and as she looked up to answer her cousin he saw that she was biting her lips in a quick nervous way to keep back the tears—a gesture peculiar to her from childhood.

“*Everything* is the matter,” she said, bitterly. “I feel as if I should never trust anyone again. I have something to say to you, Arthur, something very particular, and I want to say it very distinctly, so please to listen.”

“I’m all attention,” said Arthur, lightly still, though in reality not a little appre-

hensive as to what was coming. What could it be? Could Alys have found out about the understanding that now existed between himself and Liliās—she had been so intimate with Mary Western at The Edge? But a moment's reflection dismissed the idea. Liliās was too true to have told anyone, even her sister, without his sanction. Besides even had the fact come to Alys's knowledge, she would have been pleased and sympathising, not discomposed and indignant as she evidently was.

“Listen,” she repeated. “I want to tell you, Arthur Beverley, that supposing anything so altogether impossible and unnatural, and—and absurd and ridiculous as that you, my cousin, almost brother, should have thought of wanting to marry me—*me*, Alys!—well, supposing such a thing, I want to tell you that nothing you

or anyone could ever have said or ever could say would make me ever, even for half an instant, take such a thing into consideration. I *could* not do so. I tell you distinctly that I would not marry you for *anything*, Arthur, not if my life depended upon it."

Captain Beverley stared at her—stared as if he hardly believed his own ears.

"Does he think I am going out of my mind?" thought Alys, while across her brain there darted a horrible misgiving—could she in any way have misunderstood Miss Winstanley's confused replies?—could this impulsive act of hers, instead of being, as it had seemed to her, a positive inspiration, be after all a mistake, a terrible unwomanly mistake, which, to the last day of her life, she would blush to think of? Afterwards it seemed to Alys as if in waiting for her cousin to speak

she had lived through years of agonised suspense.

“Alys,” he said at last, hoarsely, it sounded to her. “Alys,” and oh the relief of the next few words, strangely chosen and almost ludicrously matter-of-fact as they sounded! “Would you mind putting that in writing?”

“Certainly not. I will do so this moment,” she replied, recovering her self-possession and presence of mind on the spot. “Here, give me my writing things—just push my davenport over here.”

Arthur did so, his hands trembling, his face pale with anxiety. All Alys’s nervousness and agitation seemed to have passed to him.

“It is best to do it at once,” he murmured, more as if speaking to himself than to her, “before I am tempted to say anything, [so that my conscience may be

clear that it is entirely voluntary, entirely her own doing."

"Yes," said Alys, looking up from the paper on which she had already traced some lines, "that it *certainly* is." Then she went on writing. "There, now, will that do?" she exclaimed, holding the sheet towards him.

"Read it, please," said Arthur, and Alys read.

"Of my own free will, uninfluenced by anyone whatsoever, I wish to declare that no conceivable consideration would, at this or any other time, make me agree to marry my cousin, Arthur Beverley.

"ALYS MADELENE CHEVIOTT."

"Yes," said Arthur, slowly, "that will do. Shall I thank you, Alys, or would you rather not?"

She looked up with a sparkle of her old mischievousness in her eyes.

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” she said; “I don’t quite see it, I confess. I have simply stated a fact.” Then suddenly she held up her hands before her face, which was growing hot again. “No, no, Arthur, don’t thank me,” she exclaimed; “I could not bear it. It is altogether too—too bad that anything like this should come between you and me. Go away, please, and send Laurence.”

Arthur looked at her with earnest, regretful tenderness. But he saw that she was right. She would be better without him, and he went. Five minutes afterwards her brother entered the room.

“Alys,” he said, sternly, but anyone that knew him could have seen that it was a sternness born of anxiety, “what is all

this? What have you been doing? I cannot understand what Arthur says, or rather he won't explain, but refers me to you. What have you been doing?"

"Only enacting the part of Miss Jane Baxter," said Alys, with an attempt at indifference.

"Alys, what do you mean?"

"'Who refused all the men before they axed her,'" continued Alys, in the same tone.

"Alys!" said her brother again, and something in his tone arrested her.

She looked up.

"Laurence," she said, "don't misunderstand me; I am not really flippant and horrid like that, but it is true all the same. I have told Arthur, deliberately and seriously, that, if he were ever to ask me to marry him, *nothing* would ever make me take such a thing even into momentary

consideration. I would not marry him for *anything*."

"Had he asked you to do so?" said Mr. Cheviott, in a tone half of amaze, half of bewilderment.

"No," said Alys, "I told you he had not, and most certainly after what I have said, he never will."

"Do you think he had any intention of the kind?" again questioned her brother.

Alys hesitated. Her quick wits told her that she must be careful what admissions she made. Were she to reply what she believed to be the truth—that her cousin never had had, never would have any such feelings with regard to her as could lead to his asking her to marry him—the effect on him might, she felt vaguely, be disastrous. So she hesitated, and meanwhile her brother watched her narrowly.

"I don't see," she said at last, "I don't

see that I need answer that, Laurence. All I want you to know is that, after what I have said, Arthur could never think of me in that way. I have made it impossible for him to do so."

"And what made you do this? What has put all this into your head? Was it Aunt Winstanley?" asked Mr. Cheviott.

"No," replied Alys. "That is to say Aunt Winstanley did not put anything in my head, though I forced her to answer one or two questions I asked her. She did so very confusedly, I assure you, and but for my own ideas I should have been little the better for her information. No one is to blame. I have not been as blind and unconscious as you thought—that is all."

That *was* all in one sense. It was plain to Mr. Cheviott that Alys would say

no more, and on reflection he could not see that any more explanation on her part would do any good. He stood silent, hardly able as yet to see clearly the effect of this extraordinary turn of affairs.

“I am going up to my own room, Laurence,” said Alys, rising slowly as she spoke. “I am very tired. I think I won’t come down to dinner. I don’t want you just now to say whether you think I have done rightly or wrongly, wisely or unwisely—some time or other I daresay you will explain all that has puzzled me. But in the meantime some instinct tells me, told me while I was doing it, that you, Laurence, would be glad for me to do it. Kiss me, dear, and say good night.”

He bent down and kissed her tenderly, still without speaking. But when Alys was up in her own room, safe for the night

from all curious or anxious eyes, she lay down on her sofa, burying her face in its cushions, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER VIII.

CUTTING THE KNOT.

“Let’s take the instant by the forward top ;
 on our quick’st decrees
 The inaudible and noiseless foot of time
 Steals ere we can effect them.”

All’s Well That Ends Well.

DINNER passed very silently at Romary that evening. Mr. Cheviott was pre-occupied, Captain Beverley labouring evidently under some suppressed excitement, Miss Winstanley nervous and depressed.

“Have you seen Alys, Laurence?” she said, as the butler came with a discreet inquiry as to what Miss Cheviott would be

likely to "fancy." She had told her maid that she did not want any dinner, but had been so far influenced by Mathilde's remonstrance as to say she would take anything her aunt liked to send her. "I really don't know what to send up to her," Miss Winstanley went on, helplessly. "What do you think, Laurence? I went to her room on my way downstairs, but Mathilde said she had begged not to be disturbed."

"I saw her half-an-hour ago," said Mr. Cheviott. "I think she is only tired. I will send her up something."

He got up from his chair and himself superintended the arrangement of a tempting little tray.

"Is Alys ill?" said Captain Beverley, in a low voice, and with a slight guiltiness of manner which did not escape his cousin.

"I think not," Mr. Cheviott replied, drily, as he sat down. "She has been

over-excited, and now-a-days she can't stand that sort of thing."

Arthur said no more, but he was evidently glad when dinner was over, and Miss Winstanley had left the cousins by themselves.

"Laurence," he began, eagerly, when the last servant had closed the door and they were really alone, "I am anxious to tell you everything that passed between Alys and me this afternoon. I only thought it fair to her that she should tell you what she chose to tell, first."

"That was not very much," said Mr. Cheviott, "she evidently is afraid of damaging you by saying much."

"God bless her," said Arthur, fervently, "of course she does not know the whole state of the case. But *I* am perfectly willing to tell you everything, Laurence; in fact, as things are, I should be a fool not

to do so. But, in the first place, read this."

He held out the paper that Alys had written and signed. In spite of his intense anxiety—an anxiety but very partially understood by Captain Beverley, who little knew the personal complications the charge of his affairs had brought upon his cousin—Mr. Cheviott could not restrain a smile as he read the words before him.

"An extraordinary document, I must confess," he said, as he returned it to Arthur. "Upon my word, Beverley, Alys and you are just a couple of children. If only such serious results were not involved, the whole thing would be most laughable. What can have put all this into her head?"

"Her own intentions and her own observations principally, I believe," said Arthur. "She knew something of—of my

admiration for Miss Western, and she suspected that you had exerted your influence to prevent its coming to anything. She knows you to be too honourable and right-minded to interfere in such a matter without good reason—through mere prejudice, for instance.” Mr. Cheviott winced a little.

“I cannot say of myself, Arthur, that I *was* always quite free from prejudice in this matter,” he interrupted, speaking in a low and somewhat constrained voice, “but I am, I believe I am, ready to own myself in the wrong if I have been so.”

Arthur’s face beamed with pleasure.

“Thank you for that, Laurence,” he said, “a hundred thanks. But I keep to what I said. Whatever your personal prejudices may have been, you did not act upon *them*. Your conduct was based entirely upon regard, unselfish regard for my welfare, and

this Alys felt instinctively and set her wits to work to puzzle it out. But what has first to be considered is this—the statement on that paper is Alys’s own voluntary declaration——”

“ Did she write it of her own accord ? ”

“ She first *said* it to me, in stronger and plainer words even than those she wrote ; and when I asked her if she would put it on paper, she did so in an instant—with the greatest eagerness and readiness. Now, Laurence, what is now my position ? Supposing I wished to do such a thing, *could* I ask Alys to marry me after what she has said—it would be a perfect farce and mockery.”

“ It certainly would,” said Mr. Cheviott. “ I’ll tell you what we must do, Arthur. We must go up to town and lay the present state of the case before old Maudsley, and see what he says. He is as anxious

as any of us to get the thing settled, and he must see that it would be perfect nonsense now to look forward to any possibility of the terms of the will being fulfilled. And I do not see that their non-fulfilment can possibly rest upon *you*. It is a strong point in your favour that you have done nothing premature in any other direction. No doubt we shall have to go to law about it—carry it before the Court of Chancery, I mean to say—but as all the beneficiaries, you and Alys, or myself as her guardian, are of one mind as to what we *wish*, I cannot now anticipate much difficulty.”

“But, Laurence,” began Arthur, and then he hesitated. “At all costs,” he went on again, “I must be open with you. I *have* done what you call something ‘premature’ in another direction. I am as good as—in fact, I *am* engaged to Lilius Western.”

Mr. Cheviott's brow contracted.

"Since when?" he said, shortly, while a sudden painful misgiving darted through his brain. Had *Mary* known this?—had she, in a sense, deceived him? True, she was under no sort of bond not to oppose him—rather the other way; from the first she had openly defied him on this point, but still she must be different from what he had believed her, capable of something more like dissimulation and calculation than he liked to associate with that candid brow, those honest eyes, were it the case that she had known this actual state of things all through that time at The Edge farm—so lately even as during their strange drive to Withenden and back. With keen anxiety he awaited his cousin's reply.

"Since about the time of Alys's accident. I came down here then one day—

you did not know—I was so uneasy about Alys—and I met Lillas close to The Edge, and heard from her how Alys was. And then somehow—I felt I could not go on like that, at the worst I could work for her, and I have been learning how to do so, you must allow—somehow we came to an understanding.”

“And her people know, of course—her sister does, any way, I suppose?” said Mr. Cheviott, with an unmistakeable accent of pain in his voice which made Captain Beverley look up in surprise.

“Her sister—Mary, do you mean? No, indeed she does not. None of them do. There was, indeed, very little to know—simply an understanding, I might almost call it a tacit understanding, between our two selves that we would wait for each other till brighter days came. We have not written to each other or met again.

I would do nothing to compromise Liliás till I could openly claim her. I did not, of course, explain my position; had I done so, she would not, as you once said, have agreed to my ruining myself for her sake. All she knows is that I may very probably be a very poor man. And *because* I could not explain my position, I saw no harm in keeping it all to our two selves for the present. But, you see, I have looked upon it as settled—till to-day I have considered myself virtually disinherited, and I have been working hard at C—— to fit myself for an agency or so on at the end of the two years.”

Mr. Cheviott listened attentively, without again interrupting his cousin. But Captain Beverley could see that it was with a lightened countenance he turned towards him again.

“*Alys* knows nothing of this?” he said.

“You are perfectly certain that her eccentric behaviour to-day was not caused by her believing she in any way stood between you and Miss Western? Don’t you see, if it were so, this would injure you altogether; it might then seem as if she had done what she has out of pique, or self-sacrifice, or some feeling of that kind that, in a sense, you were to blame for?”

Mr. Cheviott watched his cousin closely as he said this, but Arthur stood the scrutiny well. For a moment or two he stared as if he hardly understood; then a light suddenly breaking upon him, he flushed slightly, but there was no hesitation in his honest blue eyes as he looked up in his cousin’s face.

“I see what you mean,” he said, “but I didn’t at first. No, Laurence, Alys thinks of me as a brother; she did know, and warmly approved of my admiration for

Miss Western, but she never knew of its going further. I rather think she fancies it shared the fate of my other admirations, and that she thinks no better of me in consequence. What she did to-day had nothing to do with that. She has got into her dear little head that she comes between me and my fortune, and knowing that she never could possibly have cared for me, except as a brother, whether I had cared for her in another way or not, she has, for my sake, nobly taken the bull by the horns. And so far I feel all right. Had I proposed to her twenty times, she would never have accepted me."

. Mr. Cheviott was silent. Whether or not he agreed with his cousin was not the question. That Arthur honestly believed what he said was enough.

"And what is to be done, then?" said Arthur.

“What I said,” replied Mr. Cheviott. “We must lay it all before Maudsley as soon as possible. And in the meantime, Arthur, do nothing more—let things remain as they are with Miss Western. In any case you cannot come into your property for two years.”

“But whatever happens, I am not going to let ‘things remain as they are,’ as you say, for two years,” said Arthur, aghast. “You can continue my present income for that time, any way, now that my future is likely to be all right. At the worst, even if my engagement was publicly announced, it is six of one and half a dozen of the other as regards Alys and me. I should have shown I did not want to marry her, but she most certainly has shown she does not want to marry me.” He touched Alys’s paper as he spoke.

“Yes,” said Mr. Cheviott, “that is true.”

"Perhaps," said Arthur, laughingly, "if we appeal to the Court of Chancery, it will divide the estate between us. I shouldn't mind. Lilius and I could live on what there would be well enough."

"I don't think that's likely," said Mr. Cheviott. "However, the first thing to be done is to see Maudsley."

And it was settled that they should go up to town the following day.

But when the cousins had separated for the night, and Arthur was alone with his own thoughts, a certain feeling of dissatisfaction with his own conduct came over him.

"I can't make it out exactly," he said to himself, as he sat over the smoking-room fire with his pipe, "but somehow I've a feeling that I'm not acting quite straightforwardly. How is it? Is it that I am claiming my property on false pretences—

knowing in my heart that I never did intend to propose to Alys; or is it that I am not behaving rightly to Liliás—keeping her, or our engagement rather, dark till I feel my way? Laurence is as honest a fellow as ever lived, but then his intense anxiety that I should get my own blinds him a little, perhaps, to the other sides of the question. What a muddle it all is, to be sure!”

He sat still for a few moments longer, then suddenly rose from his seat.

“I’ll do it,” he said; “right or wrong, it seems the honestest thing. I’ll do it.”

He hunted about for writing materials, and, having found them, set to work at once on a letter. He did not hesitate in writing it; he seemed at no loss what to say, and in less than half an hour it was completed, signed, sealed and addressed to *Mrs. Western, Hathercourt Rectory.*

Then the young man gave a deep sigh of relief, went to bed, and slept soundly till morning. But very early he was astir again; before many members of the Romary household even—for it was, compared with many, an early one—were about, Captain Beverley had crossed the park, and traversed on foot the two miles to the nearest post office, that of Uxley, where he deposited his letter, and was at home again before Mr. Cheviott had made his appearance for the eight o'clock breakfast, necessitated by their intended journey.

A couple of hours later found the two young men in the train.

“Laurence,” began Captain Beverley, but his cousin interrupted him.

“Excuse me, Arthur. I want to say something to you before I forget. You must let *me* be the spokesman with Maudsley; if he proposes, as I expect, to carry

your affairs to the Court of Chancery, I think it will be best for his mind to be perfectly unprejudiced, and to let his instructions, in the first place, any way, come from me. You, I am certain, would not tell the story impartially—you would tell it against your own interests.”

“I must tell it as it is, Laurence,” said Arthur, “and, no doubt, facts will show that I am, at least, as much to blame as Alys for the non-fulfilment of my father’s wishes. For, Laurence, I was just going to tell you when you interrupted me—I’ve *done* it, out-and-out. I couldn’t stand leaving things as they were; it wasn’t fair to her, nor honest to anyone, somehow. I have written and sent a formal proposal for Lilius to her parents. I sent it to her mother, because her father is ill.”

“And what did you say?”

“I told them that my prospects were

most uncertain—I might be poor, I might be rich, and probably should not know which for two years, but that, at the worst, I could work for my livelihood, and was preparing myself for such a possibility.”

Mr. Cheviott was silent.

“Are you awfully annoyed with me, Laurence?”

A half smile broke over Mr. Cheviott’s face at the question.

“Upon my soul,” he said, “I don’t know. If a fellow *will* cut his own throat——”

“Complimentary to Miss Western,” said Arthur.

“Well, well, you know what I mean. I allow that, in your case, there was strong temptation, and, of course, Arthur, I respect you for your straightforwardness and downrightness. *Personally*, I have certainly no reason to be annoyed. What the

relief to me will be of having this horrible concealment at an end, you can hardly imagine—the misconception it has exposed me to—good God !”

He stopped abruptly. Arthur stared at him in amazement.

“I had no idea you felt so strongly about it, Laurence,” he said. “It makes me all the more thankful I have done what I have. You refer to Alys, of course? I know she must have been puzzled, but *nothing* would shake her confidence in you, old fellow, and now she will understand everything.”

“Yes, it would, of course, be an absurdity to carry out the directions about not telling her, once you are openly engaged to Miss Western,” replied Mr. Cheviott. “And, I suppose, you have not much misgiving as to what the answer will be to your letter?”

“I don’t know,” said Arthur. “It will all come right in the end, but I expect her people to hesitate, at first, on account of the uncertainty. But you don’t think there will be any question of stopping my allowance, in the meantime, if I marry before the stated period is out?”

“I think not. I can take that upon me—for Alys. But if we appeal to the court at once it will probably confirm your income till things are settled.”

That same evening the cousins returned home. Some light, but not much satisfaction, was the result of their journey. Mr. Maudsley approved of the course proposed by Mr. Cheviott, but was decidedly of opinion that no decision could be arrived at till the date fixed by Arthur’s father for his son’s coming of age. “And then?” eagerly inquired both men. He could not say—it was an unusual, in fact, an extra-

ordinary case, but, on the whole, seeing that the non-fulfilment of the testator's wishes was at least as much the lady's doing as the gentleman's—a contingency which never seemed to have dawned upon Mr. Beverley—on the whole, it seemed improbable that Captain Beverley should be declared the sufferer. “But it was a most extraordinary complication, no doubt,” repeated Mr. Maudsley, and he was glad to feel that neither he nor anyone connected with him had had anything to do with the drawing up of so short-sighted a document as the late Mr. Beverley's last will and testament.

“Who did draw it up?” said Arthur, turning to his cousin.

“A stranger,” was the reply. “You know he consulted no one about it. He knew my father would altogether have opposed it. But it is perfectly legal. Mr.

Maudsley and I have tried often enough to find some flaw in it," he added, with a slight smile.

"And what about telling Alys?" said Arthur, with some little hesitation, as the dog-cart was entering the Romary gates.

"I think," said Laurence, "I think, as she knows, or has guessed so much, it is best to tell her all. It is to some extent left to my discretion to explain the whole to her should it be evident that the conditions cannot be fulfilled, which I have always interpreted to mean in case of her or your marriage, or engagement to some one else. Of course there are people who would say that you are not yet married, hardly engaged, and that I should wait, to be sure. But honestly I confess, after what has happened, it would be repulsive to me, in fact, *impossible* to go on dreaming that your father's wishes ever could

be fulfilled. The worst of such a deed as your father's will is that all I can do is to act up to the *letter* of his instructions—as for the *spirit* of it——!”

“You’ve done your best,” said Arthur, re-assuringly; “far better than any other fellow in the same position could have done. Just you see if Alys doesn’t say so. It’s been a horrid sell for you altogether, and——”

“Not the *not* getting your patrimony. You don’t mean that?” interrupted Laurence. “Heaven only knows what the relief will be to me if, as I am beginning to hope, it is decided the right way.”

“No, I didn’t mean that exactly,” said Arthur. “I know you and Alys are less selfish and grasping than any two people *I* have ever come across—cela va sans dire—I meant the bother and worry and all the rest of it. I wish somehow *something*

might go to Alys. I can't help wishing that, you see, knowing it all and feeling just as if she were my own sister."

"*Don't* wish it," said Laurence, shortly. "Alys will have enough. Married or single she need never be dependent on anyone."

"Ah, yes!" returned Arthur; "but still—— She wouldn't be the worse of a home of her own. Downham now—it's a nice little place, and what on earth should I do with two—*three*, there's The Edge," he added, with a merry, boyish laugh—"if Downham, now, could be settled on Alys, for, you see, Laurence," he added, seriously, and as hesitating to allude to anything so completely out of the range of probabilities, "after all, it's just possible you may marry."

"I suppose so," said Laurence, with a touch of bitterness in his tone which

Arthur, had he perceived, would have been at a loss to explain, "I suppose so, but so *highly* unlikely, it is no use taking it into consideration one way or another. Confess now, Arthur, you hardly could, could you, *imagine* such a thing as any girl's caring for me?"

Arthur looked up at his cousin with some surprise. Was Laurence joking? He could not tell.

"I don't know why one shouldn't," he said, meditatively. "A girl, I mean—I don't see why you need fancy yourself so unattractive. You're good-looking enough, and—come now, Laurence, that's not fair; you're leading me out to laugh at me," for so only could he interpret the slight smile that flickered over his cousin's face.

"I was in earnest, I assure you," said Mr. Cheviott. "However, never mind. We'll postpone the discussion of my charms

to a more convenient season. Here we are at home."

"Shall you have your talk with Alys to-night?" said Arthur.

"Probably—unless, that is to say, you would rather I should wait till—till—how shall I put it?—till you get a reply to your letter to Hathercourt."

"No," said Arthur, decidedly, "don't put it off on that account. Whatever disappointment in the shape of delay or hesitation may be in store for me, I've no misgiving as far as Liliast herself is concerned. She's as true as steel. And in any case Alys deserves my confidence. No sister could have been stauncher to me through all than she has been."

And so it was decided, though, glad as Laurence felt to put an end once and for always to the only misconception that had ever existed between his sister and him-

self, a strange indefinable reluctance to tell her all clung to him.

“She will hate so to hear the idea of a marriage with Arthur discussed or alluded to,” he said to himself. “Girls are such queer creatures. However, the more reason to get it over. Will she ever tell it to Mary Western, I wonder? I shall lay no embargo upon her, for sooner or later Arthur is sure to tell the elder sister the whole story. But even if it were all explained, what then? I said in my fury that day what I wish I could forget—I said to her that I *could* have made her care for me. *Could* I? Ah, no—such deep prejudice and aversion could never be overcome. As Arthur could not conceal in his honesty, I am very far from an attractive man—not one likely to ‘find favour in my lady’s eyes.’ I am certainly not ‘a pretty fellow.’ Ah, well, so be it!”

CHAPTER IX.

“AMENDES HONORABLES.”

“ But what avails it now
To speak more words? We’re parting,
Let it be in kindness, give me good-bye,
Tell me you understand, or else forgive.”

“I’ve nothing to forgive; you love me not,
And that you cannot help, I fancy.”

HON. MRS. WILLOUGHBY.—*Euphemia.*

BUT, as not unfrequently happens, Mr. Cheviott found the anticipation worse than the reality. Alys was upstairs in her own room when they got to the house, and she begged her brother not to ask her to come down that evening.

“I am not ill,” she said, “only tired

and nervous, somehow. Come up to me after dinner, Laurence, and let us have a good talk—that will do me more good than anything.”

She looked up at him with a curious questioning in her eyes that struck him as strangely pathetic.

“Yes,” he said to himself, “she *must* be told all.”

So the way was paved for his revelations. And Alys was sufficiently prepared for them to manifest no very overwhelming surprise. She listened in silence till Laurence had told her all. Then she just said quietly—

“Laurence, it was a *cruel* will.”

“Yes,” said her brother, “however intended, so it has indeed proved.”

“Going near,” pursued Alys, softly, almost as if speaking to herself, “going near to spoil two, four, nay, I may say

five lives," she whispered. "Oh, thank God, Laurence, it is at an end!"

She clasped her thin little hands nervously. How changed she was—Alys, poor Alys, who used to ignore the very existence of nerves!

Her next remark struck Mr. Cheviott unexpectedly.

"Laurence," she said, "I wonder if Mary Western will ever know all this!"

He had it on his lips to answer, "The sooner so, the better," but he *could* not. Instead thereof his reply sounded cool and unconcerned in the extreme.

"Possibly she may, some time or other. Arthur is sure to tell Lilius Western, whom it *does* concern. But why should you care about her sister's knowing it?"

"Because I *do*," Alys replied, oracularly.

There was a large allowance of letters in the Romary post-bag the next morning.

Several for Captain Beverley—all of which, but one, he put hastily aside. And his heightened colour and evident anxiety could not but have betrayed to his companions whence came that one, had not both Mr. Cheviott and Miss Winstanley been absorbed by news of unusual interest in their respective letters.

“Laurence,” said Arthur, at last, when, for the time, letters were put down, and breakfast began to receive some attention, “is that yesterday’s *Times*? Have you looked at it? I wonder if there is a death in it of some one I know—you know who I mean—the last of those poor Brookes, Basil’s brother, I mean, Anselm, a boy of eighteen. I hear he died at Hastings, two days ago.”

“I don’t know about its being in the *Times*,” replied Mr. Cheviott, “but, curiously enough, I have just heard of it in a

letter from an old friend of mine, Mrs. Brabazon, an aunt of the poor fellow's, and——”

“And?” said Arthur, eagerly.

Mr. Cheviott glanced at Miss Winstanley.

“Afterwards,” he formed with his lips, rather than by pronouncing the word, in reply to his cousin. But Miss Winstanley had caught something of what they were saying.

“The Brookes,” she exclaimed, “are you talking of the Brookes of Marshover?” and when both her companions answered affirmatively, “How very odd!” she went on, growing quite excited, “my letter is all about them too. It is from my old friend, Miss Mashiter, who has been staying at the same hotel at Hastings as the Brookes are at, and she is quite upset about the poor young fellow's death—it

was so sudden at the last, and there is such a romantic story about. It appears that a cousin of the young man's came to Hastings lately, a most exquisitely beautiful creature, with whom he had been in love since early boyhood, though somewhat older than himself, and she has been devoting herself to him, and now the report is that, just before he died, he got his poor father to promise to leave everything to her—he has no child left, and the Brookes are enormously rich. What a catch the young lady will be!”

“Aunt Winstanley, I am ashamed of you!” said Mr. Cheviott. “I had no idea you were so worldly-minded. You don't mean to say you ever heard of such a thing as a girl's losing a lover and ^{re-}consoling herself with another—especially when the first had, as you say in this case, left her a fortune.”

“It is very sad,” agreed Miss Winstanley, quite deceived by Mr. Cheviott’s tone—“very sad, but such is the way of the world, Laurence. Of course, I would not say such a thing before Alys.”

“*Of course* not,” said her nephew, approvingly.

Arthur looked up with relief; for the instant, Miss Winstanley’s story had startled him a little—for to whom could the episode of the beautiful cousin refer but to Liliass, still, as her mother’s letter informed him, at Hastings, “doing what she can for our poor friends there.” But there must be great nonsense mixed up with Miss Mashiter’s gossip, Arthur decided, seeing that Laurence, who had the correct version of the whole in his hands, could afford to tease Miss Winstanley about it. The poor boy—Anselm Brooke—was dead, but still—the idea of Liliass’s

name being coupled with that of any man, or boy even, was not altogether palatable, and still less that of her being an heiress !

“What a mercy I yielded to my inspiration and wrote to Mrs. Western yesterday!” he replied. “To-day, after hearing that report, nonsensical though it probably is, I should hardly have liked to write.”

He was thankful when Miss Winstanley at length got up from her seat—her breakfast seemed to have been an interminable affair that morning—and saying that she must go and ask what sort of a night Alys had had, left the cousins to themselves.

“What is your news ? What does Mrs. Brabazon write about ?” exclaimed Arthur, eagerly, almost before the door had closed on Miss Winstanley.

“Rather,” said Laurence, “what is *yours* ? Mine will keep, but you, I see,

have a letter from Hathercourt which, I am sure, you are dying to tell me all about."

"To show you, if you like," said Arthur, holding it out to his cousin. "You have guessed, I see, that is all I could wish."

It was a thoroughly kind and sensible reply from Mrs. Western. She made no pretence of astonishment at the nature of Captain Beverley's letter to her; she said that she and her husband would be glad to see him again, and to talk over what he wished to say to them.

Lilias was at Hastings, but expected home in a few days. Mr. Western was continuing better. Any afternoon of the present week would find them both at home and disengaged, and she ended by thanking Arthur for his consideration in writing to her instead of Lilias's father, as he was still far from able to meet any

sudden agitation without risk of injury.

“Should I go over this afternoon, do you think?” said Arthur.

“Yes, I should say so,” replied Mr. Cheviott. “And what will you tell them?”

“Everything. I have no choice,” said Arthur. “That is to say, I shall tell them all about my father’s will and the present state of the case, and what Maudsley thinks and what *you* think. Of course I need not go into particulars as to what passed between Alys and me the other day, but I will just tell them that anything of the kind, as regards both her and myself, never has been, never *could* have been possible—that we are, and always have been, and always shall be, I trust, brother and sister to each other.”

Mr. Cheviott had been listening attentively.

“Yes,” he said, when his cousin left off speaking, and looked up for his approval, “I don’t think you can do better.”

“And now for your news—Mrs. Brabazon’s, I mean,” said Arthur, eagerly. But Mr. Cheviott showed no corresponding eagerness to reply.

“She says,” he answered, quietly, “that Miss Western is with them and quite well. Of course they are all sadly depressed by young Brooke’s death, though they knew it must come before long—she writes as if poor old Brooke had got his death-blow, but she says that ‘Lilias’ has been the greatest comfort to them.”

“And what more?” asked Arthur, “there is something more, I know. There is nothing in all that to have been a reason for Mrs. Brabazon’s writing to you.”

“I didn’t say there was. Women con-

stantly write letters without any reason,” observed Mr. Cheviott.

Arthur got up from his seat and walked impatiently up and down the room.

“Laurence,” he said at length, “I think that sort of chaffing of yours is ill-timed.”

“I don’t mean to chaff you—upon my word, I don’t,” said Mr. Cheviott, looking up innocently. “All I mean is that, whatever my news is, I am not going to tell you any more of it at present. It is much better not, and you will see so yourself afterwards.”

“You meant to tell me all when you first got the letter?” said Arthur.

“Well, yes, I don’t know but that I did. But I have changed my mind.”

“Is it—no, it cannot be—that there is any truth in that absurd nonsense that Miss Winstanley was telling us?”

“Why should you ask? It bore on the face of it that it *was* absurd nonsense,” replied Mr. Cheviott. “Do, Arthur, trust me. You have done so in important things. Can’t you leave me to tell you about Mrs. Brabazon’s letter after you have been at Hathercourt?”

“Very well. Needs must, I suppose,” said Arthur, lightly.

But he was not without misgivings during his long ride to the Rectory.

“I wish that idiotic old maid had kept her gossip to herself instead of writing it off to Miss Winstanley,” he said to himself more than once, and when he got close to Hathercourt he felt so nervously apprehensive of what he might be going to hear, that the relief of meeting, or rather overtaking Mary within a few yards of the house was very great.

Mary had no hat or bonnet on—she had

just run out to gather some fresh green for the simple nosegays her father liked to see from his sofa. She was already in mourning for her young cousin, and as she looked up with a bright flush of pleasure to return Captain Beverley's greeting, he could not help thinking that, though “not Lillas,” she was certainly very pretty.

“That black dress surely shows her off to advantage,” he said to himself, “or else she has grown prettier than she used to be. What a queer fellow Laurence is—fancy being shut up at The Edge for three weeks with a girl like that, and emerging as great a misogynist as before!”

Her mother was at home and disengaged, or would, no doubt, speedily be so, when she heard of his visit, Mary told him. Then he got off his horse, and she led him into the drawing-room.

“Mamma is in the study, I think,” she

said, lingering a little. Then, with some hesitation and rising colour, "I had a letter from Liliás this morning. She is coming home the day after to-morrow."

"So soon!" exclaimed Captain Beverley, delightedly. "That is better than I hoped for. Mary," he went on, impulsively, holding out both his hands and taking hers into their clasp, "Mary—you will forgive my calling you so?—you know what I have come about, don't you? You will wish me joy—you have always been our friend, I fancy somehow."

"*Our* friend," repeated Mary, inquiringly. "You are sure, then," she went on, "that—that it will be all right with Liliás? Yes, mamma told me of your letter—you don't mind?—it is quite safe with me."

"Mind, of course not. But how do you

mean about Liliás?” he asked, with a quick return of his misgiving. “Nothing has happened that I have not been told of?”

His bright face grew pale. Mary, with quick sympathy, hastened to re-assure him.

“Oh, no, no,” she said, “I don’t know what you have heard—but it isn’t that. Nothing of *that* kind could make Liliás change, *of course*. I only mean—it is a long time since you have seen her, and—and—you went away so suddenly, you know. Liliás has never said anything to me, but I have been at a loss what to think about her.”

“As to what she has been thinking about me, do you mean?”

“Yes,” said Mary, bluntly.

Arthur’s face cleared.

"If that is all, I am not afraid," he said, gently. "You are sure that is all, Mary?"

"Quite sure," she replied. Then, after a moment's pause, "How is Miss Cheviott?"

"Pretty well—at least, so I am told," he replied; "but to me she seems terribly changed. Laurence, her brother, I mean, won't say much about her. He can't bear to own it, I fancy. And it is so dull for her. I think that keeps her back—she should have some companionship."

Mary's face grew very grave. She gave a little sigh. "I wish—" she was beginning to say, when the door opened and her mother came in.

Alys was alone in her room that afternoon, when a tap and the request, "May I come in?" announced her cousin's re-

turn. She knew where he had been, for Laurence had told her everything; but she had not been alone with Arthur since their strange interview two days ago, and the remembrance of it set her heart beating as she called out, “Come in, by all means.”

To her surprise, Arthur came quickly up to her sofa, bent down and kissed her on the forehead before he spoke.

“Dear Alys,” he said, “I have come straight to you. It is all thanks to you, and I wanted to tell you, before anyone, that everything’s going to be all right.”

For half a second there seemed a catch in Alys’s breath. Then she looked up with a smile, though there were tears in her eyes too.

“I am so glad, so very glad,” she said, softly. “Then has Lilius come back?” she asked.

"No, she is coming the day after to-morrow," he replied, "and that reminds me—I have a great deal to tell you, Alys, and I am sure it will interest you—on Mary's account as well as on Liliás's."

"I think I know—part of it, any way," said Alys. "Laurence has been telling me of his letter from Mrs. Brabazon—he would not tell you because he thought it would be so much pleasanter for you to know nothing about it till the Westerns told you themselves."

"Yes," said Arthur, "I see."

"How strange it all seems!" said Alys. "How well I remember meeting Mrs. Brabazon in Paris last year, and how she cross-questioned me about the Westerns, at the time, you know, that Laurence was so prejudiced against them."

"And you spoke up for them?"

"A little," said Alys, blushing slightly,
 "I mean, as much as I could."

"Good girl!" said Arthur, approvingly.

"And since then, you know, Laurence has quite changed. How could he help it? You have no idea of Mary's goodness to me that time at your farm, Arthur, and knowing *her* showed what they all were, so single-minded and refined, and so well brought up though they have been so poor. You mustn't mind, Arthur—it is no disparagement to Liliias when I say I cannot help counting Mary my special friend."

"And now I hope you will see her often," said Arthur. "She would do you good."

Alys shook her head.

"I know she would," she said, "but she won't come here."

"*Now* she will," said Arthur. "She

can have no more of that exaggerated terror of being patronised, if that has been her motive. The county will all find out the Westerns' delightful qualities now, you'll see, Alys. By-the-by, I wonder what made Mrs. Brabazon write to Laurence."

"Just that someone in the neighbourhood might know the real facts of the case," Alys replied. "There is sure to be so much gossip and exaggeration. I fancy, too, she wrote with a sort of wish to disabuse Laurence of his prejudice against her cousins—I am sure she noticed it that day in Paris—— Did the Westerns tell you all about their affairs, Arthur?"

"A great deal, they are so frank and, as you say, single-minded, Alys. They have known something about it for some time, ever since Liliás met the Brookes at Hastings."

“And has it been all owing to that?”

“Oh, no—a great part of the property *must* have come to Mrs. Western; no, to the eldest son, Basil, I should say, at Mr. Brooke’s death. But the Westerns might not have *known* this, and as the father said to me, in his invalid state, the release from anxiety is a priceless boon.”

“But it isn’t only Basil that is to benefit,” said Alys, eagerly. “Mrs. Brabazon said——”

“Of course not,” her cousin interrupted. “Everything is to go to him eventually—old Brooke not having anyone to provide for, and not wishing to cut up the property—but Mrs. Western will, for life, be very well off indeed, and so will the whole family. Each daughter and younger son will have what is really a comfortable little fortune. The Marshover Brookes are *very* rich, you know.”

“And to think *how* poor the Westerns have been !” said Alys, regretfully.

“Yes; but a few years ago nothing could have seemed more remote than their chance of succession. And, after all, even very rich people can’t look after all their poor relations.”

“No, I suppose not,” said Alys, with a sigh. “Will they leave Hathercourt?”

“Sure to, I should think. Mr. Brooke wants them to go to Marshover, Mrs. Western says, and keep it up for him, as he will be most of the year abroad. He is not obliged to do anything for them during his life, you see, but he has already settled an ample income on Mrs. Western, and Basil is to go into the Army, and George to college.”

“I shall never see Mary again, all the same.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know, but I am certain she will never come here. Arthur, I think she dislikes Laurence too much ever to come here.”

Arthur opened his eyes.

“Dislikes Laurence!” he repeated.
 “Why should she?”

“She does,” persisted Alys, “and Laurence knows it.”

“Well, we’ll see. Perhaps Lilius may help us to overcome Mary’s prejudice,” said Arthur, with a smile. “And failing Mary, Alys, you won’t be sorry to have Lilius for—for a *sister*—will you, Alys?”

Alys smiled, and her smile was enough.

All this happened in Spring. Early in the Autumn of that same year Lilius and Arthur were married. They were married at Hathercourt—in the old church which had seen the bride grow up from a child

into a woman, and had been associated with all the joys and sorrows of her life—the old church beneath whose walls had lain for many long years the mortal remains of Arthur Beverley's far-back ancestress, the "Mawde" who had once been a fair young bride herself.

"As fair perhaps, as happy and hopeful as Liliast," thought Mary, as her eyes once more wandered to the well-known tablet on the wall, with a vague wonder as to what "Mawde" would think of it all could she see the group now standing before the altar. Then there came before her memory, like a dream, the thought of the Sunday morning, not, after all, so very long ago, when the little party of strangers had invaded the quiet church, and so disturbed her own and her sister's devotions. And again she seemed to see herself looking up into Mr. Cheviott's face in the porch, while

she asked him to come into the Rectory to rest.

“He smiled so kindly, I remember,” thought Mary, “and there was something in his face that made me feel as if I could trust him. And so I might have done—ah! how hasty and prejudiced I have been—thank Heaven, I have injured no one else by my folly, however!”

And then she repeated to herself a determination she had come to—there was one thing, be the cost to her pride what it might, that she would do, and to-day, she said to herself, should, if possible, see it done.

It was a very quiet marriage—for every reason it had seemed best to have it so. There were the considerations of Mr. Western’s still uncertain health, of the mourning in the Brooke family with which that of Lillas was now identified, of

Alys Cheviott's invalid condition, and even of Captain Beverley's own anomalous position, as still, by his father's will, a minor, and at present, therefore, far from a wealthy man, though every hope was now entertained that before long he would be in legal possession of his own. There were no strangers present—only the Grevilles and Mrs. Brabazon, besides the large group of brothers and sisters, and Mr. Cheviott as “best man,” and Lillas and her husband drove off in no coach and four, but in the quiet little brougham now added to the Rectory establishment, for Mr. Western's benefit principally, when he was at Hathercourt. For Hathercourt was not to be deserted, though only a part of the year was now spent there by the Rector's family, and to the curate, whose services he now could well afford, was deputed the more active part of the work. They had

all been at Marshover for some months past, and had only returned to Hathercourt a few weeks before the marriage.

“I could hardly believe in any family event of great importance happening to us anywhere else—we seem so identified with our old home. I like to think I shall end my days here, after all,” Mr. Western was saying, with inoffensive egotism, to Mr. Cheviott, as they stood together in the window after the hero and heroine of the day had gone, when Mary came up and joined them.

“Yes, father,” she said, gently. “I remember your saying so, ever so long ago. I think,” she added, turning to Mr. Cheviott, “it was the afternoon of that Sunday you all drove over to church here—do you remember?”

Mr. Cheviott smiled slightly.

“I remember,” he said, quietly. “I

have never been inside the church since, till to-day. If it is still open I would like to look round it, if I may?" turning to Mr. Western for permission.

"It is not open," said Mary, answering for her father, "but I can get the key in an instant, and, if you like," she went on, considerably to Mr. Cheviott's surprise, "I will go with you."

He thanked her, and they went. But, before fitting the great key into the old lock, as they stood once again by themselves in the church porch, Mary turned to her companion.

"Mr. Cheviott," she said, "I offered to come with you because I wanted an opportunity for saying something to you that I did not wish anyone else to hear. I have never seen you alone since—since a day several months ago, when Lilius, by Arthur's wish, explained *everything* to me,

and I want just to tell you simply, once for all, that I am honestly ashamed of having misjudged you as I did, and—and—I hope you will forgive me.”

Mr Cheviott looked at her, for a moment, without speaking—her face was slightly flushed, her eyes bright and with a touch of appeal in them—half shy, half confident, which carried his thoughts, too, back to the last time they had stood there together. She looked not unlike what she had done then, but he—There was no smile in his face as he replied.

“Thank you,” he said. “It is kind and brave of you to say this, but I cannot say I forgive you. I have nothing to forgive. If I were not afraid of reviving what to you must be a most unpleasant memory, I would rather ask if *you* can forgive *me* for my much graver offences against you?”

“How? What do you mean?” said

Mary, startled and chilled a little by his tone.

“My inconsideration and presumption are what I refer to,” he said. “I cannot now imagine what came over me to make me say what I did—but you will forgive and forget, will you not, Miss Western? We are connections now, you see—it would never do for us to quarrel. I once said—you remember—that speech is the one which I think I must have been mad to utter—that in other circumstances, had I had fair play, I *could* have succeeded in what I was then insane enough to dream of. *Now* my aspirations are surely reasonable enough to deserve success—all I ask is that you will forget all that passed at that time, and believe that, in a general way, I am not an infatuated fool.”

Mary had grown deadly pale. She drew

herself back against the wall, as if for support.

"No," she said, in a hard, constrained tone, "no, that I cannot do. You ask too much. I can never *forget*."

Mr. Cheviott gazed at her in astonishment. For one instant, for the shadow of an instant, a gleam darted across his face—*could* it be?—*could* she mean?—he asked himself, but, before his thought had taken form, Mary dashed it to the ground.

"I am ashamed of myself for being so easily upset," she said, almost in her ordinary tone, "but I have had a good deal to tire me lately. We needn't say any more, Mr. Cheviott, about forgiving and forgetting, and all such sentimental matters. I have made my *amende*, and you have made yours, and it's all right."

Mr. Cheviott's voice was at its coldest and hardest when he spoke again.

"As you please," was all he said, and Mary, foolish Mary, turned from him to hide the scorching tears that were beginning to come, and fumbled with the key till she succeeded in opening the door.

"There now," she said, lightly. "I must run home. I don't think you will require a cicerone for this church, Mr. Cheviott," and, before he could reply, she was gone. Gone—to try to smile when she thought her heart was breaking, to seem cheerful and merry when over and over again there rang through her brain the cruel words—"He never cared for me, he says himself it was an infatuation. He is ashamed to remember it; oh no, he never really cared for me, or else my own words turned his love into contempt and dislike—and what wonder!"

Two or three days after Liliass's marriage Mary heard from Alys Cheviott.

She and her brother were leaving England almost immediately, she said, for several months. The letter was kind and affectionate, but it did not even allude to the possibility of her seeing Mary before they left.

“Good-bye, Alys,” said Mary, as she folded it up, and one or two hot tears fell in the envelope. “Good-bye, dear Alys; and good-bye to the prize I threw from me, when it might have been mine—surely the best chance of happiness that ever woman was offered!”

CHAPTER X.

A FAREWELL VISIT TO ROMARY.

“He desired in a wife an intellect that, if not equal to his own, could become so by sympathy—a union of high culture and noble aspiration, and yet of loving womanly sweetness which a man seldom finds out of books; and when he does find it perhaps it does not wear the sort of face that he fancies.”

The Parisians.

THE Westerns were not to spend this Winter at Marshover. It was too cold for Mr. Western, and so was Hathercourt. A house, therefore, for the worst of the season had been taken at Bournemouth, and there old Mr. Brooke had promised to spend with them his otherwise solitary Christmas.

"I'm so glad you are going to Bournemouth," said Mrs. Greville one day, a few weeks after Liliás's marriage, when she had driven over to say good-bye to her old friends before they left; "it is such a nice cheerful place, and plenty going on there. Quite a pleasant little society. It will be an advantage for the girls if, as Mrs. Brabazon tells me, they are to be in town next year."

"But Alexa and Josephine will not be at Bournemouth except for a week at Christmas," said Mary. "They will be at school."

"And Alexa is too young to go out for at least another year," said Mrs. Western.

"But there is Mary. *You* are not going to school again, are you, Mary?" said Mrs. Greville, laughingly, turning to her.

"I almost wish I were!" she replied,

“excepting that I should not like to leave mother. But I shall not go out at all, dear Mrs. Greville, either at Bournemouth or in town. I don’t care for society.”

“How can you tell till you have tried?” said her friend.

“That’s just it. I don’t know anything at all about it, and I feel too old to get into the way of it.”

“Mary!” exclaimed Mrs. Greville; “what an idea! At one-and-twenty,” and even Mrs. Western looked slightly surprised.

“I can understand your thinking you will never care for things of the kind *much*, and I daresay you never will,” Mary’s mother observed. “But if not for your own, it *may* for others’ sakes—for your younger sisters’—be necessary for you to go a little into society.”

“Ah, well—not at present, any way,

and possibly never," said Mary. "Alexa would make a much better Miss Western than I."

Mrs. Greville smiled.

"Are you tired of your honours already, Mary?" she said. "Well, who knows!"

"I didn't mean—" began Mary, flushing slightly, "besides, it has *always* been settled that I was the old maid of the family."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Greville. "That reminds me you will find some old friends at Bournemouth—the Morpeths; you don't know, Mary, what an impression you made on Vance Morpeth."

Mary looked annoyed. "That boy!" she exclaimed, hastily, "my dear Mrs. Greville——"

"He isn't a boy—he is five-and-twenty," interrupted Mrs. Greville, slightly ruffled.

“Of course I don’t mean to say that *now*, with your present prospects you might not be justified in—well, to use a common phrase, though not a very refined one, in ‘looking higher.’”

“Dear Mrs. Greville!” exclaimed both Mary and her mother together. “*Don’t* say things like that, *please*,” Mary went on. “You don’t really think that I would be influenced by that kind of consideration?—you don’t think so poorly of me?”

“No, my dear, I do not. I think you and all of you a great deal too unworldly; I wish, for your own sakes, you *were* a little more influenced by considerations of that kind,” said Mrs. Greville, nodding her head sagaciously, and just then, some one calling Mrs. Western from the room, she went on in a lower voice, “Why are you so desperately cold to Mr. Cheviott,

my dear? Do you really dislike him so hopelessly?"

"Who said I disliked him?" exclaimed Mary, sharply, and the slight extra colour on her cheeks deepened now into hot, angry crimson.

"My dear! Don't be so fierce. Surely you can't have forgotten all the things you *yourself* said against him. Why, you would not even go to see through Romary till I coaxed you into it—just because it was *his* house. I assure you your aversion to him became quite a joke among us—Vance Morpeth always speaks of him as your *bête noire*."

Mary was silent. What else could she be?

"I only wish you had *not* expressed your dislike to or before me," continued Mrs. Greville. "I should have been only too glad to have been able to say that *I*

had never heard of it when Alys Cheviott told me how it had distressed and disappointed her."

"Did *Alys* speak of it?" said Mary, surprised and a little annoyed.

"Yes, to me—not to anyone else. You need not be indignant at it, Mary. It came about quite naturally. You know I have seen a good deal of her this Summer while you were all at Marshover. She seemed to like my going over there, and she has been very lonely, poor girl. That aunt of hers is such a goose! And one day she was asking me all about you, and she added quite naturally how much she wished you would sometimes go to see her."

"But I was away," pleaded Mary, not quite honestly.

"Yes, just then; but you had been at home quite long enough to go if you had

wished, and that was Alys's disappointment. She told me that almost her first thought, when everything was cleared up between Lilius and Captain Beverley, was, 'And now I shall be able to see Mary,' thinking, of course, that when you understood that Mr. Cheviott's dread had been altogether unselfish—fear of Arthur's ruining himself by disobeying the will—you would at once lose your dislike to him."

"And what does she now think?" asked Mary.

"She doesn't know what to think. She fears that in some way Mr. Cheviott has so deeply offended you that your dislike—prejudice—whatever it is—to him, is incurable."

Again, for a moment, Mary was silent. Then she said, hesitatingly,

"Has she—do you think, Mrs. Greville—said anything of this to Mr. Cheviott?"

“I don’t know,” said Mrs. Greville. “But of course, my dear Mary, you cannot pretend to be so modest as to fancy that your staying away from them—from Alys, at least—in this marked way, cannot have attracted attention. After the service you did them—the great obligation you put them under to you, and Alys’s constantly expressed affection and gratitude—your refusing to go to her, when she *couldn’t* come to you, was a very strong measure. And, to speak plainly, unless you had the very strongest reasons for it, I think it was very unkind to that poor girl.”

Mary, for some little time past, had been believing her punishment complete. Now, as Mrs. Greville spoke, she realised that it had not been so. She *had* been cruel to Alys; she had allowed her own feelings—her mortification at the past, her

proud terror of possible misapprehension in the future—to over-ride what was the clearest and plainest of duties. “I am not worthy to be called a friend,” she said to herself, and tears filled her eyes as she turned to Mrs. Greville.

“Thank you,” she said, gently, “for what you have said. It will not have been in vain.”

And Mrs. Greville kissed and told her if she were proud and prejudiced she was also honest and magnanimous. And then the good lady drove herself home in her pony-carriage with a comfortable feeling of self-satisfaction, and a vague, not unpleasant suspicion that she *might* turn out to have been a sort of “Deus ex machinâ,” or “benevolent fairy god-mother, we’ll say,” she added to herself, not feeling quite sure of the Latin of the first phrase, or that it did not savour a

little of profanity, "just to give a little shove to affairs at the right moment."

All day Mary thought and thought over what she should do. Could she get to see Alys, now at the eleventh hour, for the Cheviotts, if they had not already done so, must be on the eve of quitting Romary for the Winter? Should she write to Mrs. Greville and ask her to convey some message? Should she—so many months had passed since she had seen Alys that a little further delay could be of small consequence—should she wait for an opportunity of seeing Liliás, and asking *her* to explain? To explain what, and how? Ah! no, explanation of any kind was impossible, and the necessity for it she had nothing but her own foolish conduct to thank for. At last—— "I will attempt no explanation, no excuse, or palliation," she decided, "Alys is generosity itself. I will trust her

by asking her to trust me." . And that same evening she wrote to her a few simple words, which she felt to be all she *could* say.

"My dear Alys," she said, "will you forgive me? I see now that I have made a grievous mistake, done a wrong and cruel thing in never going to see you all this time. This knowledge has come to me suddenly and startlingly, and I cannot rest till I write to you. I cannot explain to you what has distorted my way of seeing things, but I ask you to forgive me, and to believe that, selfishly and unkindly as I have acted, there has not been a day, scarcely an hour, since we were together in which I have not thought of you.

"Yours affectionately,

"MARY WESTERN."

And when this letter was written and

sent, Mary felt happier than she had done for a long time. Was it all “the reward of a good conscience?” Was there not deep down, unrecognised, in a corner of her “inner consciousness,” wherever that debateable land may be, a hope, a possibility of a hope rather, that Mrs. Greville’s statement, to some extent, explained the change in Mr. Cheviott’s manner? What if Alys, after all, had been the innocent marplot—suggesting to her brother in her disappointment that the “all coming right” of Lilius’s affairs had not resulted in a complete change of attitude on Mary’s part; that her dislike to him must be even deeper founded than could be explained by her misjudgment of his conduct towards her sister? What if they had both been at cross-purposes—each attributing to the other a prejudice that no longer existed—which, indeed, Mary had done nothing to

remove his belief in on her part—which, as existing on his side towards her, she had imagined to have yielded temporarily to what he himself had described as an “infatuation,” but to return with tenfold strength?

All this she did not say to herself in distinct words, but the suggestion had taken root in her heart, and was not to be dislodged. And though days grew into weeks before there came from Alys an answer to her letter Mary went about through those weeks with lightened steps and hopeful eyes. She could not distrust Alys, she told herself; and her mother, seeing her so cheerful, congratulated herself that Mary was “getting over” the loss of Lilius, which she had been beginning to fear had greatly depressed her.

Alys’s letter, when it did come, was all that Mary had expected and more, much

more than she felt herself to have deserved.

“I will not ask you to explain anything,” wrote Alys, “I am more than satisfied. I cannot tell you what a change it makes in my life to be able to look forward to seeing you as much and as often as you can be spared to me. It will help me to be patient, and to try to get strong again. I am likely to be much alone when we return to England, for Laurence is thinking of letting Romary and taking a house for me somewhere not very far from town. He seems to have taken a dislike to a country life, and says he thinks he would be better if he had ‘more to do.’ I cannot agree with him that such a thing is possible, for I have never known him idle for half an hour.”

Mary gave a little sigh as she folded up the letter—that was all. And soon after

came on the time for the family move to Bournemouth, and with a strange feeling of regret she again said good-bye to Hathercourt.

The Winter passed, uneventfully enough on the whole. There was a flying visit from Liliás and her husband on their way back from Italy to the small country-house that was to be their home for the next two years; there were old Mr. Brooke and Mrs. Brabazon and the two school-girls, Alexa and Josey, for Christmas; there were, for Mary, very occasional glimpses of Bournemouth society; but with these exceptions her daily life was what many girls of her age would have considered very monotonous. She did not seem to find it so, however; she appeared, indeed, what Liliás called so "aggravatingly contented" that she owned to Arthur, with a sigh, that, after all, she greatly feared that the family

prophecy about Mary was going to turn out true.

“At one-and-twenty,” she said, lugubriously, “she really seems to be steadily developing into an old maid.”

“Wait a little,” said Arthur. “Mrs. Brabazon is determined to have her in town for some weeks. There is still hope of Mary’s proving to be not altogether superior to youthful vanities and frivolities.”

“Very little, I fear,” said Lillas, half smiling, half provoked.

Mrs. Brabazon had her way—Mary did go to town, and, after her own fashion, enjoyed herself. She was generally liked, in some cases specially admired, but that was all. She gently repulsed all approach to anything more, and, though grateful to Mrs. Brabazon, perplexed her by her calm equability in the midst of a life novel and

exciting enough to have turned a less philosophical young head. If, indeed, it were "all philosophy," thought Mary's shrewd cousin, and not, to some extent, pre-occupation ?

One day, towards the end of April—Mary had been six weeks in town—there came a letter from Bournemouth, asking her, if possible, to go to Hathercourt for a day or two, to make some arrangements preparatory to Mr. and Mrs. Western's return there, "which," wrote her mother, "no one but you, dear Mary, can see to satisfactorily, sorry as I am to interrupt your pleasant visit."

Mrs. Brabazon was somewhat put out. She had two or three specially desirable engagements for the next few days; but, though Mary heartily expressed her regret at the summons being, from her hostess's point of view, thus ill-timed, she owned to

herself rather enjoying the prospect than otherwise.

“I am an incurable *country* cousin, dear Mrs. Brabazon,” she said, “you will have more satisfaction in every way with Alexa, if you are kind enough to take charge of her next year.”

“And where do *you* intend to be then?” said Mrs. Brabazon, amused, in spite of herself, at Mary’s tone.

“I shall have retired to my own corner. I have always been told I should be an old maid,” said Mary, laughingly.

And two days later found her at Uxley. She was not to stay at Hathercourt, the Rectory being just released from the hands of painters and decorators, and unfit for habitation, and Mrs. Greville delighted to seize the chance of a visit from one of her old favourites.

The day before that fixed for Mary’s re-

turn to town Mrs. Greville came into the drawing-room with a note in her hand.

"You have quite finished at Hathercourt, you are sure?" she said, "you don't need to go over again?"

"Oh no, thank you," said Mary, "there is nothing more for me to do. I am *quite* at your disposal for the rest of my time. Is there anything you want to do this afternoon?"

"Nothing much—only to drive over to Romary," said Mrs. Greville. "I have a note from poor old Mrs. Golding, saying that she would be so thankful to see me. She is really ill, and quite upset with the idea of leaving Romary. She has only just heard, definitely, from Mr. Cheviott about it, as she kept hoping he would change his mind."

"Shall I not be in the way if I come with you; I don't in the least mind stay-

ing alone?" said Mary, diplomatically.

"Oh dear, no!" replied Mrs. Greville, who had not perceived the slight shadow that had stolen across Mary's face at the mention of Romary, "the fact is I *want* you, for the boy cannot come this afternoon, and I don't like driving quite so far alone."

Mary resigned herself with outside cheerfulness, but some inward misgiving.

"I would rather never have gone near Romary again," she said to herself; "however, I need not go into the house, and it will be a sort of good-bye to the place, and with it to a great deal besides."

For, of late, she had grown less hopeful. Alys had written once again, and, to this second letter, Mary had replied. But that was months ago, and she had heard no more; and, though nothing could make her distrust Alys's affection, she was be-

ginning to fear that their gradually drifting apart was unavoidable.

"Thinking of me as her brother does," said Mary to herself, "it is not possible that she and I can have much intercourse. It was insane of me to hope for it."

When Mrs. Greville's pony-carriage drove up to the house, Mary asked leave to stay outside.

"I shall be quite happy wandering about by myself," she said, "and Mrs. Golding will prefer seeing you without a stranger. How long shall you be—an hour?"

"Possibly two," replied Mrs. Greville, laughing, "there is no getting away from the old body sometimes. And as I shall not see her many more times I should like to pay her a good long visit."

"Don't hurry, then," said Mary. "I shall be all right."

It was a very lovely day. Romary looked to much greater advantage than the last time Mary had been there. It had then been mid-Winter to all intents and purposes, at least, as far as the trees and the grass were concerned. Now it was the most suggestively beautiful season of the year—Spring-time far enough advanced to have much perfection of loveliness of its own, besides the rich promise of greater things yet to come. Mary had not before realised how pretty Romary was.

“I wonder they can think of leaving it,” she said to herself, half sadly. She had sauntered round the west front of the house, along a terrace overlooking a sort of Italian garden, when, turning suddenly another corner, she came upon a well-remembered scene—the thick-growing shrubbery through which ran the foot-path leading to the private entrance near the

haunted room. With a curious mixture of feelings Mary stood still for a moment, recalling with a strange fascination the sensations with which she had last hurried along the little path. Then she slowly walked on.

Bright as the day was, it seemed dusk in the shrubbery.

“It really is rather a creepy place,” thought Mary, “one might expect to meet any kind of ghost hereabouts.”

And as if the thought had conjured up some corroboration of her words, at that moment in the narrow vista of the path before her there appeared a figure approaching in her direction. For one instant Mary started with a half-thrill of nervous apprehension—was she really the victim of some delusion of her own fancy?—then she looked again to feel but increased bewilderment as she more clear-

ly recognised the figure. How *could* it be Mr. Cheviott? Was he not most certainly still at Hyères? Had not Mrs. Greville told her so that very morning?

There was just this one flaw in her argument—the person now rapidly nearing her *was* Mr. Cheviott! And when Mary became convinced of this her first sensation of amazement gave way to scarcely less perplexing annoyance and vexation at being again met by him as an uninvited intruder on his own domain.

“Was there *ever* anything so awkward?” thought Mary, “was ever anyone so unlucky as I?” she repeated, proudly stifling the quick flash of gladness at meeting him again anywhere, under any circumstances. And so overwhelmed was she by her own exaggerated self-consciousness that when in another moment with outstretched hand

he stood before her, she did not even notice the bright look of pleasure that lighted up his face, or hear the one word, "*Mary!*" with which he met her.

Whether she shook hands or not she did not know. She felt only that her heart was beating to suffocation, and her face crimson as she exclaimed, confusedly,

"Mr. Cheviott! I had not the least idea that you were here—in England even. I only came over with Mrs. Greville—I am so vexed—so ashamed—— If I had had any idea——" Then she stopped, feeling as if she had only made bad worse. Mr. Cheviott looked at her.

"If you had had any idea I was anywhere near here you would have flown to the Land's End or John o' Groat's House to avoid me—is that it?" he said, and whether, he spoke bitterly or in half jest to cover

some underlying feeling, Mary really could not tell. She turned away her head and did not speak.

“If he takes that tone,” she said to herself, “I shall—I don’t know what I shall do.”

“Won’t you answer me? Mary, you *must*,” he said, passionately, facing round upon her—half unconsciously she had walked on, and he had kept abreast of her—and taking both her hands in his—“Do you hate me, Mary, or do you not?” he said. “I am not a proud man, you see, or else my love for you has cast out my pride; perhaps you will despise me for it, for a *second* time daring to—but I made up my mind to it. I came back to England on purpose to be *sure*. At least, you must see that my love is no light matter, and—oh! child, tell me—*do* you hate me? Look up and tell me.”

He had changed his tone to one of such earnest appeal that Mary trembled as he spoke. But when she tried to look up her eyes filled with tears, and the words she wanted would not come.

“*Hate* you?” was all she could say.

But it was enough. He looked at her as if he could hardly believe his eyes.

“Do you mean to say—*Mary*—do you mean that you *love* me? And all this time——”

A smile broke through her tears.

“Can’t you believe it?” she said. “At least, you may absolve me from having ever told you anything but the plain truth as to my feelings towards you,” she added.

Then he, too, smiled.

“But,” she added, “the last time we met, you yourself called it an ‘infatuation.’ I thought you had grown ashamed of it.”

“Ashamed of it,” he repeated, “ashamed

of loving you? My darling! Ashamed of my reckless inconsideration for your feelings?—yes, I had reason to be *that*. And an infatuation it certainly did seem, to believe that there was any possibility of your ever learning to care for me, for there were all those months of disappointment after my conduct in that wretched complication had been cleared up, and day by day Alys hoped, and I hoped, for some sign from you. And then what you said to me the day of the marriage, I looked upon as merely wrung from you by your brave conscientiousness—that made you feel your acknowledgment of mistake was due even to me. Do you see?”

“Yes,” said Mary; “but,” she added, shyly, “what made you change?”

“Your letter to Alys partly; by-the-by, you have to tell me how *you* came to change so as to write it? And then—I

don't know how it was—I felt my case so desperate; I had nothing to lose, and oh, Mary, what an inestimable possibility to gain! I made up my mind to try once more, and as soon as I could leave Alys I came home, never hoping, however, to see you here—in the very lion's den!”

“Does Alys know why you came?”

“No, I would never have told her, or anyone, had I failed. But to think that I have won!—— Mary, I never before in all my life dreamt of such happiness. I have everything that makes life worth having given to me in you. And, do you know,” he added, with a sort of boyish *naïveté*, “I don't think I ever realised how wonderfully pretty you are? What have you been doing to yourself?”

Mary laughed—a happy, heartfelt laugh that fully vindicated the youthfulness she had begun to believe a thing of the past.

She was not above feeling delight at *his* thinking her pretty.

“It is your eyes, I think,” he said. “They were always nice, sweet, honest eyes, but now something else has come into them. What is it?”

“Guess,” whispered Mary. “I don’t think it was there this morning.”

“It wasn’t your beauty I ever thought the most of,” he said. “It reminds me of something I read the other day, that when a man *does* find his ideal it is sure ‘not to wear the face he fancies.’ But I have got it *all*, face too!”

“And now,” said Mary, “please go away. I am sure Mrs. Greville is ready, and I don’t want to keep her waiting.”

Mr. Cheviott’s countenance fell.

“Mayn’t I come with you to meet her? Won’t you tell her?” he said.

“Not before *you*!” said Mary, laughing.

"But I will tell her—I should like to tell some one," she added, girlishly.

"And when can I see you?"

"To-morrow morning. Come to Uxley early if you can. I am not leaving till the afternoon. And then we can fix about—about your going to see them at Bournemouth, and all that."

"But *I* would like to tell some one, too, this very minute, at once, and I have no one. What shall I do?" he said, ruefully.

"Tell Mrs. Golding," said Mary, mischievously, and before he could stop her, she had turned and was running at full speed along the shrubbery path, back to the front of the house, where, sure enough, Mrs. Greville and the pony-carriage were waiting.

Ten minutes after, Mr. Cheviott entered the old housekeeper's room.

“Mrs. Golding,” he said, “I am not so sure that I *shall* let Romary after all!”

THE END.

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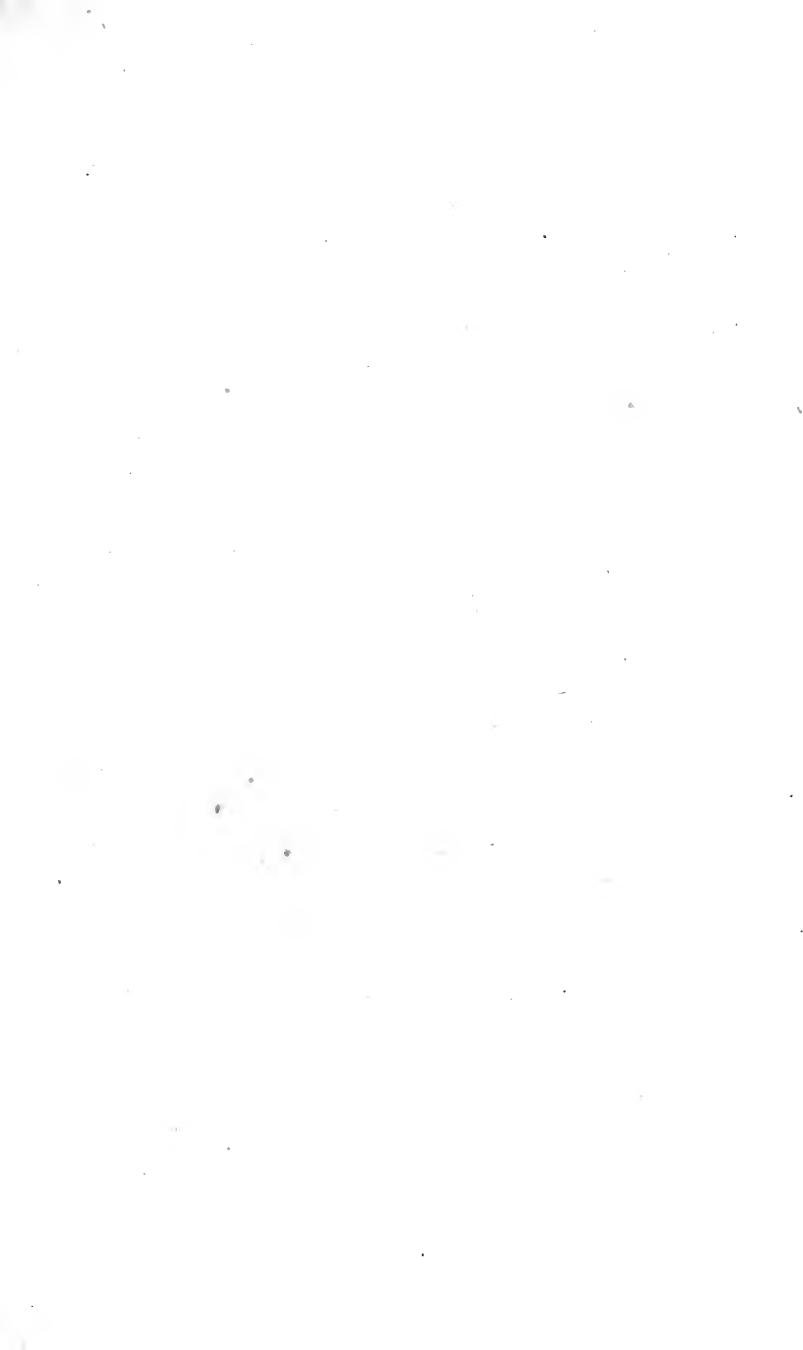
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